

RETURN ONCE

MURDER IN TARSIS

Classics Series



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Forgotten Realms / Dragonlance

The Mysteries: Murder in Tarsis

By John Maddox Roberts

Chapter One

A thin mantle of snow lay upon the city, reflecting the gleam of the full moon, silver-gilding its towers, its mansions and great public buildings. Some windows glowed with the soft yellow light of shaded lamps. In others shone the brighter pinpricks of candles, and a few flickered orange with the radiance of hearth fires. Above many rooftops, thin columns of white smoke ascended from chimney pots into the still air of night.

The man who contemplated this tranquil scene found it quite lovely, albeit charged with an inescapable melancholy, for great segments of the city were dark and ruinous. From these sections came no cheering glow, and no fragrant smoke arose therefrom. This sadness he found in no wise displeasing, for he fancied himself a poet, and poets are ever drawn to melancholy.

He stood in a window beneath the eaves of the Inn of Happy Return, named in the days when the city was a great port and happy returns were not uncommon, when its argosies sailed the great seas of the world. Indeed, any sort of return was happy, when one considered the alternative. The inn stood on a rise of ground in the southwest corner of the city, near the rectangular fort that once guarded its harbor. From this, the third floor of the inn, he could overlook the entire city, for he was above the level of all but its highest towers.

Tarsis the Proud she was known in those days, he mused, and Tarsis the Beautiful, even Tarsis of Ten Thousand Ships, although this was surely an exaggeration. What is she now? he thought. Tarsis the Dying, perhaps. In the great Cataclysm the sea had fled Tarsis, leaving her like a bride spurned by her lover upon the steps of the temple. The land trade kept her a viable city, but she could no longer support the population of old nor enjoy the prosperity that had once

made her, if not queen city of the world, at least first among princesses.

He found himself moved to compose a poem upon this famous tragedy, but he had scarcely time to expand his opening verse into a couplet when there came a knocking at his door. "Enter," he murmured, not turning.

The knocker who came in was a squat man wearing an apron and a cloth cap whose long, tasseled tail dangled beside his round, whiskery face. "You have a visitor," the innkeeper announced.

The man who strode in behind him was too lofty a personage to knock at lowly doors. He was dressed all in black velvet embroidered with silver thread. His gloves and boots were of soft black leather, and he wore the half-mask affected by men and women of fashion. At his waist was belted a slender sword and its matching dagger.

"Build up that fire, innkeeper," said the aristocrat, not deigning even to nod toward the little blaze in the corner hearth, "and close those shutters."

"I prefer to breathe the bracing air of winter night," said the poet in the mildest of voices, stopping the innkeeper in mid-bustle. "But do by all means revive the fire."

While the innkeeper poked at the fire and placed kindling on it the two men said nothing. A girl in a tight-laced bodice above a stained skirt brought in a platter bearing a pitcher, two goblets, and an assortment of seedcakes, dried fruits, and hard-baked biscuits. She filled the goblets and withdrew wordlessly.

Satisfied that the fire now burned properly, the innkeeper stood. "Will there be anything else, my masters?" He smiled hopefully, but there was no reply and he bowed himself out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

The man in velvet took a goblet in a gloved hand and drank. "You are Nistur," he said, not making a question of it.

"I am he," said the poet, taking the other goblet.

"You come highly recommended."

"I have always given my clients satisfaction."

"My own name is of no concern to you," said the man in velvet, haughtily.

"And for this reason I have not asked it of you."

The aristocrat was somewhat nonplussed, for he was accustomed to a certain modicum of groveling from his inferiors, even from those with a fearsome reputation, such as this man possessed. Indeed, the fellow was not at all what he expected, and he studied the figure before him with some care as he pondered his next words.

The man named Nistur was short and rather stout. His jerkin of soft brown leather strained its laces over his paunch, its nap worn and shiny in spots. His yellow boots, once fine but now much scuffed and stained, came to midhigh, their tops turned down. Between jerkin and boots he wore baggy trunk hose, black slashed with orange. His shirt of white linen with its leg-of-mutton sleeves was frayed at collar and cuffs.

Yet withal there was about the man an air of neatness and precision. His broad, long-fingered hands were immaculately manicured. The ends of his mustache were curled with care and his beard trimmed to a symmetrical point. The abundant, curly black hair stopped an inch above his ears, leaving a dome of bare, gleaming scalp to reflect the firelight. Beneath sardonically arched brows, his eyes were black, sharp and steady.

"I was composing a poem upon the semi-tragic fall of your city when you arrived," Nistur said.

"Greater poets than you have made it their life's work," the other said, sneering at this presumption. "And how is it that you think this subject merely semitragical?" Even as he said it he was nettled at himself for admitting interest in the thoughts of such a man.

"In the great tragedies, cities perish at the height of their glory, as did Istar. For a great city to continue so diminished is ignoble and not fit subject matter for a true epic."

"I did not come here to speak of poetry," said the aristocrat.

"I desire the death of a man. Is this not your craft?"

"It is, indeed," said Nistur. "Truly, I am a poet, but these times are unkind to one who seeks to exercise the divine gift, so I must have a means to earn my bread. I choose the ancient and most honorable vocation of the assassin."

"Gild your profession as you will," said the man in velvet, smoothing a long, graying mustache with a gloved finger on which gleamed a golden ring wrought in the semblance of a dragon that gripped in its talons a huge, blue pearl. "The man who must die calls himself Iron-wood. He is a mercenary, at present residing in an inn on the old waterfront, such as is favored by his kind. Why he must die is—"

"Is no concern of mine. Yes, I know. If you do not feel constrained to explain your reasons for hiring a killing, please do not feel compelled to remind me of the fact repeatedly. You are not my first client."

Stung by this insolence, the aristocrat was about to put the assassin in his place when they were interrupted by sounds from the street below. An exchange of angry shouts, rendered confused and incoherent by echoing from the many-angled walls bordering the narrow street, was followed by the sound of steel clashing on steel. The ring of metal bore a flat, tinny undertone that the experienced ears of the two men above recognized as the sound made by weapons of indifferent temper.

The two went to the window and gazed with interest on the scene below, each for his own reasons. The aristocrat raised his half-mask to see the better, but he kept his face half averted, a velvet-gloved hand between himself and Nistur's gaze. The assassin did not even try to look. As far as he was concerned, the less he knew about his employers, the better. In the street below a dozen men were engaged in combat, wielding curved, two-handed swords with more enthusiasm than art. Even as the two watched, a man fell, then another, amid curses, shouts, and screams. Blood, rendered black by

the light of Solinari, began to pool in the snow.

The fight continued for perhaps a hundred heartbeats; then the survivors of one faction had had enough, broke away and ran, closely pursued by the sound men of the other side, who bayed like hounds on the scent of prey. Two men lay still on the street amid spreading black puddles, while another limped away, using his long sword as a crutch, his hand clasped against a badly gashed thigh.

The aristocrat and the assassin turned from the window. "Brawling bands of ruffians," said the former. "The city is full of them of late. They all use those two-handed slashers. In my day, men dueled with the rapier." He touched the slender blade at his side.

"Yours was a more elegant time," said Nistur. "The sole advantage of their choice of weapon is that it allows one to perform maximum damage with minimal skill, making it ideal for street brawlers like those we just observed. My own weapons are rather antiquated." He nodded toward a corner of the little room where a sheathed sword stood propped with its belt wrapped spirally around it. It was not a rapier like the aristocrat's, nor a curved two-hander like those of the street bravos, nor yet was it the long, straight, broad battlefield weapon favored by soldiers, nor the cutlass of the sailor. Instead, it was a basket-hilted sword of middling length, perhaps three fingers longer than two feet. Next to it rested a small, spike-bossed buckler of beaten steel, no more than a foot in diameter.

"The basket-hilt is out of fashion, to be sure," said the aristocrat. "But at least it is a gentleman's weapon. Broadsword or backsword?" he asked with a certain interest. The nobles of Tarsis liked to think of themselves as a warrior aristocracy, although in reality they had relinquished that role to professionals many generations before. Still, practice at arms was esteemed a gentlemanly accomplishment.

"Backsword," said Nistur, meaning that it was a single-edged blade, rather than the double-edged broadsword. "It was

forged two hundred years ago by dwarves of the Anvil-Breaker clan."

"They made storied weapons," the aristocrat acknowledged. "I have some specimens in my own family armory. Very well, to business. You seem to know your craft and now you know the name of your vie—your subject. Will you require anything else?"

"I hesitate to bother one as noble as yourself with trifles," said Nistur, "but there remains the matter of my recompense."

"Oh. Yes." The velvet-wearer reached into a srip at his belt and drew forth a leather purse that he tossed on the table with a grimace of distaste. "Here is half, as agreed. Upon successful completion of your mission, leave word with the innkeeper and you shall have the remainder." There could be no haggling. The fee for this service was set by ancient custom.

"There will be one more thing," the aristocrat continued, "a trifling matter, but one I would see done."

"What might that be?" queried Nistur.

"The man wears a rather unusual armor. After your commission is accomplished, be so good as to remove it and hand it over when you collect the balance of your pay."

The short man bristled with indignation. "Sir, you insult me! I am an assassin of high repute. I do not rob the dead! I realize it is customary for heroes and even kings to strip the armor from a slain foe of high rank, but that may be done only on the battlefield. It would be a degradation for a man of my profession! Surely, you have flunkies who can perform this deed for you, after I have carried out my commission."

The velvet-clad man seemed about to give way to a burst of temper, but he restrained himself. "Very well, if you have so high an opinion of yourself. Just accomplish the killing and collect your pay."

"Just so that is understood," said Nistur, somewhat mollified. "You will know when my mission is accomplished because

there are those who report to you all that occurs in this city. When you are so informed, send the balance to me here."

"As you wish," said the aristocrat. He adjusted the half-mask over his visage. "I do not expect to encounter you again. Best that you should leave the city as soon as you have collected your blood money, assassin."

"I cannot think what would detain me here, lacking the pleasure of your company, my lord," said the other.

The man in velvet whirled, snatched the door open, and disappeared amid a swirl of cloak-skirts and winking silver thread.

The door closed, and Nistur sighed. He had known long ago, when he had taken up his doleful profession, that he would be in the service of such men. He knew as well that the man who hired him would try to have him killed once the job was done, probably by the person sent to deliver the balance of the payment. Men of that class spoke much of their honor, but they bothered to behave honorably only toward their equals and superiors, and then only when they saw it to be to their own advantage. Nistur had been forced to chastise many such clients in the past.

He refilled his goblet and returned to the window. As he sipped he sought to remember the poem he had begun earlier, but found that it had fled from his mind. He shrugged. No matter. The city of Tarsis now seemed to him unworthy of a fine poem. Let it die and be forgotten.

Already the night watch had dragged away the bodies from the street below. There were dark pools on the snowy street, long streaks where the bodies had been dragged off, and an arc of blood spread across a whitewashed wall, long, thin trickles depending from its rainbow curve. The silver moon illumined the scene with great clarity, but it leached all color from it. Nistur found that he was moved to create another poem, this one in the terse, elegant style of the Istarian verse-epigram.

Blood upon the snow

Fair the face of the silver moon shines
Upon the blood of the unworthy
Will it be the moon of night or the sun of day
That shines from my life's blood?

Mightily pleased with this exercise of his gift, Nistur prepared himself to go out and undertake the task for which he had been retained.

From long habit he reached within his jerkin and assured himself that the short double-edged dagger was in its accustomed place, hanging from a thong around his neck. Next his hand dipped into the turned-down top of his right boot and felt the flat bone handle of his long dirk. All was in order. He belted on the basket-hilted sword and hung the little shield from the hook on his sword sheath. From a peg by the door he took his wide, low-crowned hat, decorated with long feathers. Thin blades were sewn into the edges of its brim. He threw a fur-trimmed cloak over his shoulders and, last of all, drew on a pair of gloves made of fine kidskin, embroidered with colorful thread.

Thus attired, Nistur left the room, descended two flights of stairs, passed through the common room, and went out into the chilly night, to all appearances nothing more than an ordinary burgher armed with but a single weapon, and that the graceless, townsman's sword scorned by aristocrats and professional fighting men alike.

The tavern was named the Drowned Sailor. Its construction was of mixed stone and timber, the wood mostly scavenged from old ships. Despite the long absence of the sea that had once lapped at the wharves only a few steps from the front door, the place retained a certain nautical panache, as it had in the days when it was truly an establishment catering to seamen. In the areas away from the hearth, illumination was provided by old ship's lanterns. Models of old vessels hung from the rafters, and the walls were decorated with paintings of sea battles. The bar was made from the huge, flat

shoulder blade of

a sea dragon. At least, such was the owner's claim. It was definitely the bone of an imposingly large creature.

Despite the absence of sailors from the city, the tavern entertained a sizable and heterogeneous company. The teamsters, drovers, and riders of many caravans favored the place, for four great roads and a number of lesser ones converged on Tarsis. Also present in significant numbers were mercenary soldiers, at loose ends after exhaustion brought an end to a number of small, local wars.

Few of the guests were of the nonhuman sort, for Tarsis was not hospitable toward such persons. Once a cosmopolitan port, the city had withdrawn into itself, growing insular as the sea receded. Even the human transients, of whom there were many, were left in no doubt that their welcome would not outlast their ability to spend money.

Whatever the attitude toward them of the city fathers, merchants, and other residents, the company in the tavern were convivial, spending and gaming away their pay; resting and finding recreation after the rigors and austerities of long travel; preparing for the next, long leg of their various journeys, whether to the sea, to Thorbardin across the Plains of Dust, to the storied lands of the east, or to other, nameless destinations. The wine and ale flowed freely, songs in a half-dozen languages rang out at intervals, and the rattle of dice was unceasing.

In this gregarious company one figure was distinguished for his solitary aloofness, seated as he was by himself at a tiny table in a corner far from the hearth. He seemed a young man, yet the expression on his dark, weathered face was that of embittered age. Straight, somewhat unkempt black hair brushed his shoulders, and he gazed broodingly into the bottom of a near-empty tankard. As he raised the vessel his hand began to tremble, and he hastily set the cup back on the table, glaring at his hand with hatred, as if it had betrayed him.

As the lone man raised his tankard for a second try, the door opened to admit a short, stout fellow in a wide, feathered hat and winter cloak whose neat, almost delicate appearance seemed somewhat at odds with the raffish nature of the regulars of the Drowned Sailor. He spoke for a moment with the barkeep, and that worthy nodded toward the lone man at the corner table. The man in the hat crossed the common room and paused beside the little table until the solitary man looked up at him.

"Pardon me, sir," said the standing man, "but I am given to understand that you are of the mercenary profession."

"I am that," agreed the other.

"My name is Nistur. Might I be permitted to join you?"

"Suit yourself," said the lone man ungraciously. He raised his tankard again. The hand trembled slightly, and he steadied it with the other.

Nistur sat. "If you will forgive my observing, sir, you have the look of a man gazing into the bottom of his last cup."

"And if I am, what of it?"

"Only that I wish to buy you another." Even as he spoke, the barkeep arrived with a pair of very large tankards.

"Two bumpers of my best, as ordered," he announced with pride. As he set the tankards on the table a small figure, cloaked and hooded, passed behind him. With a speed creditable in so burly a man, the barkeep whirled and snatched the hood back, revealing the fine-boned, somewhat smudged face of a young person of indeterminate gender.

"Shellring!" the barkeep snapped. "How many times have I warned you about coming in here? I'll not have you troubling my guests!"

The huge, gray eyes widened with offended innocence. "I came in only to get away from the cold for a while.

Would you drive me forth on so cruel a night?" The voice might have been a young boy's or that of a girl just coming to womanhood. Shellring's reddish hair was shorn irregularly

to a bristly stubble, rendering judgment of sex no easier.

"I would indeed. Begone! Jump for the door or I call the watch forthwith!"

With a hiss, the person called Shellring fled. The bar-keep turned back toward the two he had just served.

"Sorry about that, sirs. I try to keep the riffraff out of this place, but it's like trying to block a cold draft. They always seem to find a way in." He bustled away to see to his other patrons, leaving the two isolated in the midst of the crowd.

"I thank you," said the man who had been alone, grudgingly. He raised the fresh tankard and drank. This time his hand did not tremble. He set the tarred, wooden vessel down with a thump. "Now, what's your proposition?"

"Proposition?" said Nistur, startled by his abruptness.

"Aye, proposition. You have named me mercenary, and mercenary I am. You must know that the word means 'motivated by money' I suspect that you are going to offer me some."

"Oh, yes. Indeed," Nistur mumbled, examining the man even as he drank from his own tankard. As the bar-keep had suggested, the ale was superior. The man before him appeared to be in his twenties, but there was something about the shape of his eyes and ears that hinted at elven blood, and this might call for a reassessment of his age. The hands now loosely nested around the base of the tankard were large, with thick palms and prominent knuckles. A thin band of gold winked from one finger. They were fighting man's hands, but they also resembled the hands of a dwarf. What sort of fellow was this?

That he was indeed a mercenary there could be no doubt. He was clad in armor of a most unusual sort: a close-fitting suit of tiny, glistening scales that covered him from neck to wrists to the tops of his knee-length boots. Whether the scales were some sort of metal or the hide of a strange reptile Nistur could not tell. Gauntlets of the same construction hung from the man's belt, which also supported

on one side a rather short curved sword and on the other a long dagger with an exceptionally wide blade. On the table next to his tankard rested a helmet that was no more than a light skullcap of steel.

"To be sure, I wish to employ you. I am a merchant, you see, engaged on an expedition to Zeriak. It is a trading venture, to determine whether a profitable market exists there for certain dyestuffs and spices. I serve as broker for these goods, representing a syndicate of traders."

"Zeriak? There is a great stretch of near-trackless land between here and that place."

"Wherefore I require a guard who is an experienced fighting man and a traveler. You appear to be such a man."

"So I am. So are half the men in this tavern. Why do you not approach them?"

"They belong to bands. Hire one and you must hire all. I require only a single escort. The barkeep here assured me that you are alone."

The man barked a humorless laugh. "Alone! Aye, I am that. And for reasons more than adequate."

Nistur sighed. "You seem reluctant, sir. In my previous experience, mercenaries becalmed by an extended peace are more than anxious to find employment. If you are not of that inclination, I shall inquire elsewhere." He began to rise.

"Stay!" the mercenary said with a forestalling gesture. "I am interested. But I am not a trusting man. If the pay be agreeable, I will go with you. Just now, anything that gets me away from this dismal city sounds more than tempting."

Nistur resumed his seat. "Excellent. How may I call you, sir?"

"Ironwood."

"And what land do you call home?"

"None. I gave up my past when I adopted the mercenary trade. It is not wise to investigate too deeply into the past lives of my colleagues."

"I am acquainted with the custom. Mercenaries are not the only persons who prefer to make their own lives, rather than

continue those to which they were born." He took a meditative sip. "Well, then. I intend to get an early start in the morning. Will you come with me now?"

Ironwood drained his tankard and stood. "I am ready."

"Have you no belongings to gather?"

"What you see is all I have. Lodging and provisions are dear in Tarsis. I have sold off or gambled away all else. I kept only the wherewithal to earn more." He clapped the steel cap on his pate. "Let's be off."

They left the inn, and Nistur saw that Ironwood lacked even a cloak. The armor could be little protection from the cold, and a cutting wind swirled the snow crystals along the narrow streets. He felt a momentary pang, knowing that he had no quarrel with this man who had fallen upon such hard times. He tried to shake off the mood, for it boded ill for a man of his profession. Compassion was no concern of his, only the accomplishment of a clean, elegant kill for his client.

In a place where two narrow streets met, there was a tiny square with a fountain at its center. Crossing this square, they paused at an unwonted sound from overhead. It was like muted, distant thunder, and Nistur, frowning, studied the silvery clouds advancing toward the moon from the south.

"Those clouds mean more snow, not rain," he mused.

"Strange to hear thunder at this time of year."

"It isn't thunder," said the mercenary.

Startled at what sounded like dread in the man's voice, Nistur looked at him and saw that the man's expression was as unsettled as his voice. He followed the line of the mercenary's gaze back toward the cloud bank and for an instant thought he saw an uncanny form flit from one billowy tower to another, leaving behind nothing but an impression of a vast, winged shape.

The assassin shook himself. Now, when he needed all his professional faculties, was no time to be distracted by

apparitions in the heavens. "Come along," he said, moving back into the street with short, quick strides.

They turned along an alley that the moon overhead, shining down between rooflines, turned into a silver ribbon. Coming to a place where the alley widened a bit, Nistur halted.

"This seems like a good place," he announced.

"Eh?" Ironwood said suspiciously. "A good place for what? Where are we going, anyway?"

Nistur turned and bowed with profound courtesy. "My friend, a certain party desires your death, and I have been retained to satisfy this desire. Please do not take this personally; it is a professional matter. You may now consider yourself to be in mortal peril." Having delivered this warning, he drew his basket-hilted sword.

"An assassin, eh?" Ironwood said with contempt, but without surprise. Clearly he had received more bad news than good in his life. "And you want to fight it out? Your kind usually favor a dagger in the back, or poison in the cup."

"Only the dregs of the profession," Nistur assured him. "They give us all a bad name." He dropped his cloak and slid forward, the little buckler extended before him.

In a single, fluid motion Ironwood thrust his hands into the gauntlets at his belt and drew his short sword and broad dagger. The weapons, Nistur noted, were as unusual as his own. This should make for an interesting match, but it could have only one outcome. He knew himself to be a great master of the sword, and he had never met a soldier who was more than merely competent with the weapon. Soldiers depended upon strength and valor and protective armor, seldom possessing the sheer skill of a man who had devoted every day for many years to practice at arms.

The straight blade of Nistur flickered and was opposed by the mercenary's broad dagger. Ironwood sent his curved sword toward Nistur's head, knee, and flank, and each time it rang from the boss of the small shield, which the shorter man seemed to maneuver with an adroitness little short of

miraculous. There was no great clamor, for these were experts, not brawlers flailing away like fools. The blades rang with the clear chime of perfectly tempered steel, but the noise would not have been heard a score of paces distant.

Nistur was amazed at the mercenary's skill. Rarely had he encountered a soldier with such exquisite command of his weapons. Even so, the parries of the broad dagger were getting a bit wide, and twice his parry failed entirely, forcing Ironwood to deflect the straight blade with his armored forearm. It did him no harm, but it showed that his timing was flagging as the fight progressed.

The armor, Nistur saw, was going to present a problem. He could hack through it in time, but that would lack style, and even his fine, dwarf-forged edge would be damaged by such misuse. Thus far, he had employed only the edge, but his sword had a point and was useful for thrusting as well. He decided that, when the duel had progressed to the proper stage, he would thrust unexpectedly

just above the neckline of the scale suit, making an appropriate closing verse to this poem in action.

Nistur was preparing the final combination of cuts and parries that would end with the fatal thrust when, abruptly, Ironwood staggered sideways. The hand that Nistur had seen trembling on the tankard now shook violently.

Ironwood gritted his teeth and cursed in a language Nistur did not recognize. "Not now!" the mercenary growled, his right knee seeming to buckle beneath him.

Nistur was tempted to try the rare but effective full-body lunge and end the match instantly, but caution told him to hold back. There was many a ruse in swordplay calculated to gull an opponent into an unwise commitment: the false stumble, the exaggerated effects of a trifling wound, the feigned distraction, all of them were ways by which reckless duelists were drawn into premature assaults. Every truly dangerous, killing attack left the attacker momentarily open

to a deadly reply, and such moves were to be essayed only when it was certain the opponent would be unable to take advantage of this opening.

So instead of lunging in, Nistur stood back, fully on guard. Instead of attacking the man before him, he beat strongly at the curved blade. The hilt flew from a hand that seemed to have become nerveless. Ironwood seemed to be devoting all his efforts just to keeping on his feet. But Nistur knew full well that the defensive dagger was also a weapon of assault. Using his point to threaten the other's face, he slid in and rapped the broad blade with the edge of his buckler. The weapon skittered musically on a snow-bare patch of paving stones.

Slowly, Ironwood's knees gave beneath him, and he fell to the alley with a rustle of scales. Reptile hide after all, Nistur decided. Not metal. With a foot he turned the man over, and the black eyes glared at him, the limbs twitching uselessly.

"I fear I must finish this, my unfortunate friend," Nistur said, resheathing his sword. "Do not take it too hard. I do not know from what condition you suffer, but clearly you had little future left as a mercenary, and I now understand why you were so alone."

He drew the dirk from his thigh boot. The beautifully polished ten-inch blade flashed in the moonlight. Like his sword, it was single-edged, intended primarily for thrusting but with a thick spine that added power to a cut, a handy feature to use against an opponent not expecting such a maneuver.

As he knelt by the fallen mercenary, Nistur was overcome by a wave of revulsion. There was no honor in this. The man was helpless through no fault of his own nor through any efforts on Nistur's part. A fine but unlucky swordsman was going to die at the behest of some repulsive aristocrat who hated the mercenary and despised the assassin, but who wished to keep his own velvet-gloved hands clean.

These were profitless thoughts, he told himself. He placed

his point against the man's throat. Even as he performed the act, Ironwood's left hand flashed upward, something glittering in it. Nistur felt a blow beneath his chin and a spreading numbness. He tried to drive his point downward but found he could not. A concealed dagger! What infamy! He sat heavily, and the snow sent a chill through the seat of his breeches.

"I am slain—and justly—for my unmanly hesitation," Nistur said, wishing he had some better last words prepared. It was an unforgivable oversight in a poet. "Nonetheless, sir, that was dishonorable, even for a mercenary! I would have expected better from you."

Ironwood creaked out a laugh. "Had that been a dagger, would you be talking now?" He seemed to be forcing the words past a half-paralyzed larynx. "Nay, your tongue would be nailed to your palate. Here is the maid that kissed you." The mercenary's left hand shook, but Nistur saw clearly the gold ring on the smallest finger. Now turned so its thin band was inward, it displayed ribbons of gold worked into an intricate knot. The assassin had seen its likeness before.

"The Knot of Thanalus!" he wheezed.

"Aye. Even one such as I keeps back one defense against need. Now, assassin, you are bound to me and may do me no harm." He tried to laugh, but at last his powers of speech failed him. He seemed to have lost control of his limbs utterly. Nistur expected to see the man's eyes roll back, but they remained steady, still doing his bidding when all else had failed him. Clearly, the assault with the ring had been Ironwood's last act of volition and must have required a great effort of will.

Nistur was in a quandary. He was now bound to serve the man he had tried to kill. He did not question the fact. Had the spell not been potent, he would have succeeded in driving his point home, even having suffered a mortal wound. The problem was, what could he do? He had no idea

what ailed the mercenary. Was it mortal, or would it pass? Either way, a freezing alleyway was no place for either of them to spend the night.

The assassin got to his feet and retrieved his cloak; then he gathered Ironwood's dagger and sword. He turned to see a cloaked form crouched over his former victim and current master.

"Here, now! Who are you? Get away from that man!"

The figure looked up. Within the cowl, Nistur saw the face of the one called Shellring, expelled from the tavern by the barkeep. "He needs help," said he or she, Nistur was not certain which.

"Truly. I never would have guessed, left to my own poor mental devices."

"I'll get help," said Shellring, straightening and bumping into Nistur as he came forward to thrust the odd person away. "Oops. Excuse me, sir. I'll be back presently."

Before Shellring could go two paces Nistur grabbed a thin shoulder, spun the figure around, and performed a quick, practiced frisk. This satisfied him of two things. One was that Shellring was female, although young and thin to the point of emaciation. The other was the nature of her profession. He held up before her eyes two purses, one bulging and the other flat. The suspension strings of both had been neatly severed.

"Getting his was no great feat, but please accept my compliments upon your appropriation of mine. I never felt a thing."

Shellring seemed not in the least abashed. "How did you know, then?"

"In the first place, acts of disinterested charity have been woefully rare in my experience. In the second, I have seen you move with great adroitness this evening, yet you jostled me like the veriest oaf. This alone was sufficient to warrant a closer look. I am astonished that you did not get his ring."

"I tried," she admitted. "It wouldn't come off."

"Many would have removed his finger to get it."

Now she looked offended. "What do you take me for?"

"Let us pass over that question in a delicate silence. Is there someplace where my friend can find relief for his condition?"

She frowned down at the recumbent form, which was no longer even twitching. "He's your friend? You could've fooled me."

"He is now, and I feel the most urgent need to make him well. Answer my question. I will pay you well for your guidance."

"I know a healer. He's a good one. Lives out in the old harbor. And you don't need to pay me," she added haughtily. "I can steal what I need."

"I did not mean to insult your professional expertise. Here, you carry his weapon belt and helmet. I'll carry him. Lead the way, but don't get too far ahead."

"You plan to carry him by yourself?" she said skeptically.

"He's half again your size!"

"People are so easily deceived by appearances." Nistur stooped and grasped the fallen man by one arm. Straightening, he pulled the mercenary halfway up, then got a shoulder into his midsection. Standing fully, the assassin had the warrior neatly balanced over his shoulder. "For instance, you probably would not have guessed that I am a poet, would you?"

"Not right off," the thief admitted.

As they slowly walked back down the alley toward the harbor, thin clouds began to form and fresh snow began to fall.

Chapter Ctpo

"How much farther?" Nistur demanded. He was trying not to display fatigue, but his breath was beginning to wheeze, sending twin jets of steam from his nostrils. The armored man across his shoulder seemed to be growing heavier by the minute.

"Not far. It's one of these hulks. Around here somewhere,

anyway."

With this conditional reassurance, they went on, searching among the grounded ships.

When the sea had receded from Tarsis many years before, it had left a huge fleet stranded in the harbor. The Cataclysm had struck at the end of the sailing season, when everything from fishing smacks to war galleys had been secured in the docks or riding at anchor. The bulk of them had been trading vessels: fat-bellied ships sporting two or three masts, with capacious hulls and large cabins for passengers, officers, and crews. Most had settled to the sandy harbor bottom on even keels and had gone nowhere since, at least not intact.

Over the years, many of the ships, especially the smaller ones, had been broken up as a ready source of sawn lumber, others for firewood. A few had rotted and were now nothing but malodorous heaps of wood pulp. But many had been utilized as cheap housing by the poor and the outcast. The Cataclysm had been felt here as a great earthquake, in which thousands had been killed by falling masonry and brick. Many of the survivors never again felt safe in stone houses, and the old ships gave them a sense of safety.

Most of the hulls so utilized were propped upright with great, slanting timbers. These prevented them from rolling over on their sides. Some had even been built upon, with superstructures using wood cannibalized from other ships, so that they now towered several stories above their former decks, with windows, balconies, and awnings. Some had been painted in bright colors or had the signs of inns, taverns, or shops above doorways carved through their hulls. Most, though, were mere slums, rotting beneath the sun of summer or freezing in the winter, with the wind whistling between timbers from which the pitch and caulk had long since fled.

The population of the harbor were, technically, Tarsian, but they were not of Tarsis proper. The people of the city did not

consider those of the harbor to be true citizens, and the latter did not much care to associate with the former, who were almost as contemptuous of them as they were of foreigners and nonhumans.

"This is it!" Shellring said triumphantly. The cutpurse stood before the hulk of a tubby merchant vessel of middling size, dwarfed by the huge, long-voyage treasure argosies. Still, to Nistur's eye it looked snug and well maintained. Like the others, its masts were long since gone, replaced by a single chimney from which smoke ascended invitingly. It was all the more inviting as Nistur grew more tired and colder, and as the snow began to sift down more heavily. Pale yellow light glowed through the leaded glass of the stern-castle windows

Shellring pounded on a door beside a massive, slanting support timber. "Old man! Let me in!" She pounded again, and after a few moments the door opened, spilling warm yellow light onto the snowy harbor bottom.

"Who is it? Shellring? Are you in need of help?" Nistur could not see the speaker.

"Not me. There's a man here who's in awful shape. Can you look at him?"

"I suppose so. Bring him in." Whoever it was stood aside from the doorway, and the young woman passed through. Stooping and twisting to get his burden through the doorway, Nistur followed. Within, he found himself in a cavernous room that had once been the forward hold of the merchant ship. Riblike timbers curved up the sides, and massive crossbeams loomed overhead. Illumination came from oil lamps burning in sconces attached to the ribs.

"Stabbed in a fight, eh?" The speaker was a man of distinguished years, white of hair and beard. He wore a severely plain, sacklike gown of coarse brown cloth, topped by a cowl and half-cape of matching material.

"He bears no wound," Nistur said. "He was stricken a little while ago by some strange malady, and my little friend here

tells me that you are skilled in healing."

"I have some modest skills in that area," the old man said. "I am Stunbog, a very humble practitioner of the arts."

"The tubby one can pay," Shellring said, helpfully. "He's a hired kil—ouch!" Nistur's hand had clamped on her bony shoulder.

"I am a poet, Nistur by name, and the friend of this most unfortunate man. Please do what you can to aid him."

"I'll do that, pay or no pay. Myrsa, come take this man to the infirmary and get him out of this lizard skin."

A woman came forward from a dim recess of the room. She was much taller than Nistur, with a broad, handsome face flanked by thick braids made up of hair that was

oddly mixed, red and gold. She was clearly a barbarian of some sort, he could not name her people, though he considered himself a fair judge of the various nations and tribes of the world. She took the inert man from his shoulder and, even as he was relieved of the weight, he was amazed at the ease with which she handled the stricken warrior. Her powerful, statuesque body was clad in garments of beautifully dressed hides that fit her like a second skin, their intricate embroidered designs almost like tattoos in the lamplight. Bulky as she was, her fur-topped boots made no sound on the wooden flooring as she bore her burden into a small side room and shut the door behind her.

"I will examine him presently," said the healer. "Come and warm yourselves while Myrsa gets him ready."

The assassin and the thief followed the old man to the after part of the hold, where they ascended a stair to a large room that must once have been the captain's cabin. It had windows of leaded glass, benches alongside a table of massive wood and, best of all, in one end of the cabin a stout brick fireplace, in which a cheery blaze burned upon ornate andirons.

In the warmth Nistur doffed hat and cloak, hanging them on pegs that had once held a captain's sea cloak. Stunbog took

a pitcher of hammered copper from the hearth and poured warmed wine into glazed earthenware cups.

"I thank you most gratefully," Nistur said as the wine did its work, warming his chilled body and easing the ache in his shoulder. "I do not know what came over my friend. One moment he was fight—he was as lively as you could ask, the next he was trembling and losing the use of his limbs. Then even his voice went. He seems able only to breathe. And his eyes are alert. Clearly, he is conscious."

"I see," Stunbog said. "He showed no sign of infirmity before he was stricken?"

"Earlier in the evening I detected a slight trembling in one of his hands," Nistur said. "And a little later ..." He hesitated.

"Later?" Stunbog urged.

"Well, this may not be relevant, but we heard a strange sound, rather like thunder, an odd sound in such weather. I saw him looking skyward, and he wore a look of... almost of terror. Surely such a hard-case mercenary could not fear thunder. Perhaps he suffered some sort of delusion, a vision of horror."

"A sound like thunder? But you yourself saw nothing?"

"For a moment I thought..." He paused, as if embarrassed.

"Well, no, I really saw nothing."

"I see," said the old man, pondering.

The barbarian woman came into the cabin. "He's ready for you now," she said, her voice so thickly accented that Nistur could barely understand her.

"I must leave you for a while," said the healer. "Please, help yourselves to the mulled wine. Myrsa, find them something to eat. People need to fortify themselves on a night like this."

The healer left them, and the barbarian woman went forward into another chamber that was, presumably, the kitchen or galley, depending on whether nautical terminology still applied. While Shellring made herself at home, stretching out on a cushioned window seat, Nistur examined his new

surroundings with lively interest. His wide travels had given him a great love of novelty, and seldom had he found himself in a more eccentric milieu.

The air in the cabin was rich with the scent of herbs, for bunches of them hung drying above the little hearth, and similarly fragrant bags dangled from the overhead beams. Books of magical lore lined the shelves, sharing space with instruments of metal, crystal and glass, all of them wrought in arcane designs. There were racks of specimen jars labeled in a number of writing and hieroglyphic systems. The bones of many strange animals were scattered here and there, some of them mounted on armatures to form complete skeletons in lifelike poses. Mortars contained crushed minerals and powdered herbs.

"A humble healer indeed," Nistur murmured. On a bulkhead he spied a circular looking glass, and in this he examined himself. Lifting his neatly trimmed beard, he craned his neck in order to view the exposed flesh at this awkward angle. Just beneath his jaw he could see that the skin had been marked as by a fresh brand, although there was no sensation of pain, and even the previous numbness was fading. A pattern of bright, interlacing red stripes clearly defined the Knot of Thanalus, about the size of a thumbprint. With a sigh he looked away from his reflection. How long was he to be bound by this spell?

The barbarian woman returned. "Here," she said. "Don't starve to death." She set down a platter that held flat loaves, cheese, dried fruit, and finger-sized salted fish. It was humble fare, but at this time of year fresh food was to be found only in the houses of the wealthy.

Shellring transferred her spare frame from the window seat to the table bench and began, without preamble, to stuff her mouth. Nistur sat and began to eat with more decorum but just as heartily. His situation was, at the moment, precarious in the extreme, and he knew well that it behooved one caught in such circumstances to lay in a good store of fuel

when the opportunity presented itself, for who knew when he would once again have a chance to eat?

"Will you not join us?" he said to the barbarian woman. "Not hungry," she said, her tone indicating that no hunger, however urgent, would impel her to sit at the same table with him. Nistur was certain he had given the woman no cause for offense, but he had met with unearned hostility before in his eventful life, and he was fully prepared to cope with rejection in a manner befitting a poet and philosopher. He helped himself to some more of the fish.

"Oh, unbend a little, Myrsa," said Shellring. "He's not such a bad sort. He caught me getting away with his purse and didn't even give me a kick." She laid a slice of cheese on a thick slab of bread and bit into it.

"If you say so, little one." To Nistur's astonishment, the big woman ruffled Shellring's stubbly hair affectionately. There was no affection at all in the look she bent upon him.

"I do not believe I can quite place your people," Nistur said to her. "Those designs embroidered on your tunic are similar to some mountain folks' work I have seen, yet the cut of your leggings is that of the ice people. In either case, you seem to be far from home."

"Who told you I have a home?" she said. She turned and stalked away, displaying a soaring eagle embroidered across her broad back.

"Not a friendly one, is she?" Nistur said when she had gone forward.

"Don't mind her. She hates everybody except for Stunbog, and sometimes me. Even I have to watch out when she's in a bad mood."

"Barbarians have a reputation for ferocity," he observed, "but seldom is it so freely bestowed. Usually they reserve their hostility for hereditary enemies, and show only varying degrees of contempt for the rest."

"I don't think she has a real tribe," Shellring said. "Sort of a loner, like me."

This seemed strange to Nistur, for he knew barbarians and all other primitive peoples were fiercely attached to their tribes, clans, and other family groups. Outcasts usually pined away and died upon long separation from their people. Most barbarians thought awful wounds and death to be trifling matters, whereas outlawry and exile were punishments too terrible to contemplate. If this woman was an exile, he reflected, it could well account for her ill temper. A few minutes later they were rejoined by the healer. The old man poured himself a cup of the mulled wine, then sat at the table, removing a pair of round-lensed spectacles.

"Your friend is in no danger at the moment. He will recover from this attack within a few days. But his affliction is mortal and will kill him within a year or two." Having delivered this dismal news, he drank with some satisfaction.

"What is the nature of his ailment?" Nistur asked. "I have been acquainted with him only a brief while, and I have never seen quite such a seizure, either in him or in anyone else."

"I think he is a bold, reckless, and extremely unlucky man," said the healer.

"His boldness one may infer from his profession," Nistur affirmed. "One seldom encounters mercenaries of a retiring disposition. Recklessness and ill luck are more difficult to discern, barring long observation of a man's behavior."

"I know he is bold and reckless because he once fought a black dragon," said Stunbog. "He is unlucky because it bit him."

"Bitten by a dragon?" Nistur marveled. "I would think, under the circumstances, that surviving such a mishap indicates a luck surpassing expectation."

Stunbog shook his head. "No, despite their fearsome snouts and fangs, many dragons are inefficient biters, more dependant on their terrible breath and snatching claws. It was an immature specimen, and its venom had not attained full potency or the man would have died instantly.

Instead, he was smitten with a returning paralysis. It has progressed to the point that an attack renders his limbs completely useless. In time the paralysis will spread to his heart and lungs and he will die."

"How do you know the dragon was black?" Nistur asked.

"This property of the venom of the young black dragon has been noted in the literature I've read about the creatures. Also, he is wearing its hide."

"He might've stolen that suit," Shellring suggested. She held a fish in one hand and a dried pear in the other and seemed to be having difficulty in deciding which to eat first.

"No, the armor was tailored for him and him alone," Stunbog asserted. "It fits him as closely as Myfsa's barbarian hides. Sometimes a soldier will have another man's suit recut for himself, but the fit can never be made perfect. The dragon skin was harvested no more than five years ago. I can tell this by the condition of the scales. This is consistent with the progression of the illness. Hence, the man who sleeps below is the one who slew the dragon, took its skin, and had it made into armor for himself."

"And yet he has not escaped the dragon's revenge," Nistur said. "Surely, this is matter fit for a poem. Heroic verse is a specialty of mine, as it happens."

"Truly?" said Stunbog. "I would have thought you a man of a ... shall we say, a more aggressive profession."

"Indeed? A casual perusal of your home," Nistur gestured around him, taking in the arcane paraphernalia, "and listening to your most learned disquisition on the nature and quality of dragons, would lead me to think you are more than a mere healer of modest means and abilities."

Stunbog polished the smudged lenses of his spectacles. "I am but a student of magical lore, perhaps even a scholar of small repute. But I practice only the healing arts."

"I see," Nistur replied. "You must be a man of rare strength of character."

"How might that be?" Stunbog asked innocently.

"Why, sir, it is well known that very few are the persons who, having mastered the lore and spells of the wizardry arts, are not tempted to put them into practice. It is averred by many that by the study of these arts the student's mind and soul are seized by a compulsion to traffic with arcane powers and essay thaumaturgical feats."

"I, too, have heard that rumor, but I place little trust in it. There is another tale I have heard, maintaining that no one who has devoted many years to the exercise of arms can thereafter restrain himself from using weapons in earnest, and even earn his living with them. Yet we know this to be a fable, do we not?"

"Even so, learned healer," Nistur agreed.

While this exchange passed between them, Shellring's eyes rolled back and forth from one to the other, like those of a spectator at a duel. She had lived by her wits all her life, and she knew when two men were taking one another's measure, each seeking to learn about the other without revealing too much of himself.

Their uneasy exchange was interrupted by a loud knocking from below. "What now?" Stunbog said.

"Sleepless nights are a well-known hazard to the healer's profession," Nistur commiserated.

The barbarian woman appeared, a far smaller figure hovering behind her. "Delver's here," she announced laconically. She stood aside to reveal a dwarf of a sort Nistur had never encountered before. His hair and flowing beard were pure white, although he did not appear to be especially old by dwarven standards. His skin was as pink as that of a maid caught in midblush, except where dark blue veins showed on the backs of his hands. He squinted as if even the light of the lamps and fire were too bright for his eyes.

"What is it, my friend?" Stunbog asked.

"There's a new colic among the young ones, Stunbog," said the dwarf in a voice like millstones grinding. "We think some

may die. Will you come?"

Stunbog sighed. "If you think it that serious, then I had better. Myrsa, will you fetch my bag?"

The woman left and returned moments later with a large satchel of sealskin. "Bad night to be out," she announced. "Dangerous, too."

"I'll wait for you outside, Stunbog," said the dwarf. He seemed anxious to get away from the light.

"You can accompany me if you feel concerned," said Stunbog, amusement in his voice.

"And leave them here alone?" She jerked her thumb toward Nistur and Shellring.

The healer smiled. "Shellring never steals from us, and I assure you that our new friend Nistur is too honorable a personage for such things. He is a poet."

The barbarian woman grunted, as if she put little faith in this line of reasoning.

"Where did the dwarf come from?" Nistur inquired. "I saw none in the city. Is his band passing through?"

"No," Stunbog replied, "his people have lived here almost from the founding of the city. They are the descendants of folk hired to dig the foundations. Many of the oldest buildings extend several stories underground. That is where the Tarsis dwarves live. There are not many of them now. With no infusion of new blood for centuries, they now suffer from a number of hereditary conditions. I fear they will be extinct within a few more generations. Of course, that can be a long time for dwarves."

"Astonishing! I had thought Tarsis a wholly human city."

"Few places are as simple as they seem to us on first impression. Tarsis is no exception. There are many cities here. The Old City, the New City, the underground, the harbor, these are just the major divisions. There are others. Well, I must go now. There are cabins here where you may sleep. I will look in on your friend early in the morning."

"You have my profoundest gratitude," Nistur said.

"Don't thank me until the man recovers," Stunbog said. He donned a cloak and drew its hood over his head. Carrying his bag, the barbarian woman followed him. At the doorway, she glared back at Nistur, as if promising dire consequences should all not be in order when she returned. Then the two were gone.

"Your city is a much more interesting place than I had thought," Nistur observed. "What an unlikely pair. And that dwarf. Are the rest like him?"

Shellring nodded. "More or less. They live underground, can't take bright light. They never harm anyone, but people are afraid of 'em, think they're ghosts or something."

"I fear that my friend's treatment may be dear. I am troubled as to how I am going to pay for it."

Her eyes widened. "That purse I took off you was heavy. Old Stunbog never asks much."

"Oh, I must return that purse. It was my fee, and I failed in my mission." He sighed at this reversal.

Now her eyes grew even wider. "Return it? Are you crazy?"

"No, but I am a man of principle. There is such a thing as professional ethics, you know."

"I don't understand you! First you try to kill a man, and then you don't when it looks like the gods have given him to you as a gift. Then you take him to a healer, and now you want to give money back to some vicious coward who hired you to murder the poor fool!"

"Please," said Nistur, offended. "I am not a murderer. I am an assassin."

"Big difference."

"I would not expect you to understand. You are an odd sort of person yourself. Shellring is a lovely name for a somewhat less than lovely person. How did you come by it?"

She grinned lopsidedly. "It's from my trade." In the growing warmth of the cabin she had doffed first her cloak, then her jacket. Now her upper body was clad only in a vest of soft leather, and Nistur saw that she was not emaciated as he

had first judged, but rather lean and sinewy, like an acrobat. Her hand dipped into a pouch at her waist and emerged with a broad ring of shell covering the first joint of the thumb. In her nested fingers glimmered a tiny knife, its blade less than two inches long.

"It's how cutpurses work in this city. See, you distract your mark, or a friend does it for you. You get the purse strings between the blade and the ring and snip them. The mark never feels a thing."

"I am familiar with the technique. In my homeland the cutpurses use a thimble of horn to cover the thumb tip. For this reason they are called 'hornthumbs.' Shellring makes a much prettier name."

"Where is your homeland?"

"Far from here," he said. "What were you called before you earned your professional title?"

"Anything people wanted to call me. Mostly it wasn't very nice. You want a lot of information without giving much out."

"I am naturally curious. I am not naturally informative. I am most free with my poetry, though. Would you care to hear some?"

"Maybe another time," she said, yawning. "What I think I'll do is turn in. I haven't had a full belly in days. Come on, I'll show you where the cabins are."

He rose to follow her. "Do you stay here often?"

"Just once before, maybe a year ago. I got in a little scuffle and took a dagger through my leg. I had a place in a cellar in the Old Town then. I holed up and waited to heal, but it just got worse. An old beggar-woman came by to trade and saw how bad I was. She told me about this healer who lived in a hulk out in the harbor. I managed to limp out here, and he took me in. Saved my life and my leg, let me stay here the better part of a month and never asked for pay. That's why I haven't been back since."

He followed her down a stair into a narrow hall lined with doors. "I don't understand."

"The way I figure it, when somebody treats you like that, you don't abuse them, you see what I mean? If I kept coming back, he might think I was taking advantage, treating him like a regular mark."

"Ah, I see." She led him into a tiny room equipped with a narrow bed and a candlestick. There was a space beneath the bunk large enough to accommodate a sea chest. Once, the cabin had probably been a mate's quarters. "I apologize for speaking condescendingly to you this evening. I perceive now that you are a person who values honor and ethical behavior."

"Plus," she added, "Myrsa might think I'm taking advantage of him, and there's no way I want to fall afoul of that woman. She's as protective of him as a mother hen."

"They are an odd pair," Nistur said, now yawning himself. It had been a long, eventful day. "I wonder how the two of them ended up together?"

"I've never heard the story," she admitted. "But I bet it's a good one."

He was running through a devastated village. On all sides buildings were toppled, thatch roofs aflame, walls pulverized. It was not the wreck of battle. It was something else, something infinitely more dreadful. He had never run from battle, but he was running from the awful thing that pursued him. His gasping breath tore at his lungs, for the air was full of afoul, choking gas, like that released when acid dissolves minerals. Everywhere lay the corpses of villagers, all of them burned or asphyxiated, all wearing expressions of utmost horror, all of those faces accusing him.

Before him he saw a spreading shadow, so vast it darkened the whole landscape. It was the thing behind him, the thing he dared not turn to behold. Somehow, he knew that if he could get out of his suit of scales, he might escape. His hand tore at the armor, and to his horror he found he could not remove it. The skin had become his own. In his ears thundered the beating of a huge heart as the shadow of

wings spread before him, descending on him.

Ironwood jerked awake, covered with a cold sweat, eyes rolling in terror. Where was he? The heart pounding was his own, but nothing else about him had any strength. He could barely gasp and move his head from one side to the other. His limbs were weak and inert, but no longer paralyzed. The memory of the dream faded, leaving behind little save a sense of long-ago horror.

He knew that he was recovering from another attack. This had been a bad one, the worst so far. He saw timbers overhead, and smelled the burnt-pitch scent of tar. Was this a ship? How had he come here? Where was the assassin? The fight was the last thing he remembered. He was so weak and exhausted that he knew he

could do nothing about his condition, not even call out. He felt sleep draw over him once more, and he slipped into unconsciousness muttering incantations he had learned years before, invocations to protect him from evil dreams.

Chapter Chree

The Lord of Tarsis sat in discussion with his Inner Council. By ancient custom all were fully masked so that, in taking a vote, each was supposedly anonymous, although in actuality, each man present knew the identities of the others. The lord alone wore no mask. He was a tall man with a long, saturnine face. He was not born to his office, for the lord was elected by the Great Council of two hundred aristocrats, who chose the lord from among the Inner Council of ten. Great rivalry, conniving, and backstabbing went into obtaining a seat on the Inner Council. The greatest degree of these things went into being elected Lord of Tarsis. Thus each lord was the most capable, as well as the most ruthless, aristocrat of the land.

The common people of Tarsis knew nothing whatever of these matters. Certain persons were born aristocrats, and the leader of these was the Lord of Tarsis. Commoners were seldom aware of his name and were never told when one

died or was deposed or otherwise replaced. As far as they were concerned, there could have been but a single lord in office since the founding of the city.

The aristocrats of Tarsis, unlike those of most nations, did not owe their position to broad lands with farms and herds and tenants. They were the descendants of the great merchant families of the city. Many of them had fallen on hard times, but they strove with all their might to maintain the pomp and estate of aristocrats. When a family fell truly destitute, its members usually left the city rather than endure the humiliation of being reduced to commoners.

Truly, the lands around Tarsis were poor, unsuited to productive farming. The small peasant farms near the city could produce no more than was required to feed the inhabitants of the city itself. Rather, the plains were home to herds that could endure the harsh winters and live on the short, tough grass that grew there with scant abundance. As in most lands, these herds were owned by nomads who would as soon raid Tarsis as trade with the place. The nomads were warlike and unpredictable, and sometimes broke treaties of years' standing out of sheer boredom. They might well have destroyed the city many years ago had they not waged incessant warfare on each other.

It was these nomads that troubled the thoughts of the Lord of Tarsis on this night.

"My lords," he began, "the time has come to reach certain decisions concerning the embassy sent here by Kyaga Strongbow, the new chieftain of the nomad tribes."

"Is embassy not too lofty a word for a pack of unwashed savages?" said one, whom the lord knew to be Councilor Rukh, his chief rival in the last election and a man who would still very much like to be Lord of Tarsis.

"It is diplomatic custom to treat all envoys the same, whether they represent great civilized nations or primitive tribes. It is a fiction, but it has worked well for many centuries. This warrior-herdsman is Ambassador Yalmuk

Bloodarrow, and his entourage shall be tolerated as long as they keep the peace."

"That will not be long," said another, whose yellow mask the lord knew to cover the visage of Councilor Blasim, a fat, lazy man whose great wealth had won him his place on the Inner Council. "These ignorant savages have no sense of self-restraint. They will get drunk and start fights before long."

"If so, they will be expelled. Come now," the lord said impatiently. "These are petty matters. Our dislike of the barbarians is of little importance. We must deal with them, and only a united front, and an agreed-upon policy, will do. These creatures may be primitive, but they will quickly discern any disunity in our ranks and take swift advantage of it. Am I understood?"

"You are, my lord," they all said, nodding.

He had to be satisfied with that. He knew he could not trust a single one of them. He wished momentarily that Tarsis had a true kingship, with each great lord owing unswerving loyalty to his sovereign. But such was not to be. The city had been founded by merchant families, each almost insanely jealous of all the others. They had arranged matters so that the lord had the highest authority, but no family had sole claim to the title. The result was that he was surrounded by envious rivals rather than liegemen.

"Councilor Melkar, you undertook to make a reconnaissance of this Strongbow's domain. What real threat does he pose?"

Melkar wore a white robe and a red mask. "The threat is very real indeed," he said bluntly. "He is the first chieftain in many generations to set himself up as overlord of the Plains of Dust and actually forge a certain amount of unity out of the nomadic tribes. For a long time they have been content to fight each other and come here only to barter their meat and milk, their hides and their wool for the products they need. Kyaga Strongbow thinks the time has come to demand these things as tribute, and he now has an army that can

make that demand stick."

This set the others abuzz. "You have seen this army with your own eyes?" demanded a blue-masked man.

"I have. Five thousand seasoned riders, each an expert archer, each with four or five first-rate mounts. And they are loyal to Strongbow. They think he has great magic."

"Archers," said Councilor Rukh with contempt in his voice. "All men know that it is unwise to be caught out on the plains by such warriors, exposed to their arrows. But mounted archers can do little against the walls of a great city."

"This is true," said the lord, "but it would be better to eliminate the threat before the city is besieged." His confident words masked a greater worry: the walls of Tarsis had been erected when the city had ten times the population it now possessed, when the countryside round about had been fertile and peopled with many villages that added to the strength of the land. Now many parts of the wall were ruinous, and he doubted he had the manpower to defend a third part of what still stood strong.

"You mean to sow dissension among the tribes?" asked Councilor Blasim.

"It has always been our policy," said the lord. "Take aside some of the higher-ranking members of the embassy and sound them out. Some may be more than willing to take a bribe to sell out their chieftain. Simple warriors may think their leader is a god, but the chiefs will know he is just an unusually successful specimen of their own type. What is more, many of them will be jealous. I have encountered few such men who were not willing to betray their lord for the right price, something they would as lief do for nothing."

"Sagacious as always, my lord," said Blasim. "Distasteful as it will be, I will befriend some of these men and acquaint them with the wisdom, as well as the benefits, of cooperating with us."

"Do so. The rest of you follow suit. There is an encampment

of these mounted bandits setting up outside the walls. I want you to call on them. Pretend great interest and friendliness. Sound them out. Discover which among them have a taste for gold and fine weapons and other valuable things. Councilor Rukh." "Yes, my lord?"

"As officer in charge of city security, you are to make a survey of the walls, but be discreet about it. I want no panic among the citizenry. In the meantime, hire up the mercenaries who frequent the harbor-front taverns. This is ostensibly for a punitive expedition against the bandits who have been plaguing the caravans coming here from Ice Mountain Bay, but put the soldiers in the old barracks of the harbor fort, well away from the nomad camp. If there is to be fighting, it is better to sacrifice foreigners than citizens."

"As you command, my lord," said Rukh, in a tone that stopped just short of open insolence.

"Who shall pay for this, my lord?" asked Councilor Mede, a banker whose mask was embroidered with gold thread.

The Lord of Tarsis gritted his teeth. They were merchants and feared for their money more than for their safety. But he had to keep them satisfied or his own position would become precarious.

"We shall levy an extra duty on goods moving through Tarsis. Should it come to fighting, tactics can be arranged such that most of the mercenaries will be killed in combat, saving us most of their pay. Are there any more questions before we proceed?" There were none. "Good. All know our policy and how to behave toward these savages." He took a hammer from the armrest of his throne and with it struck a gong that hung beside the great chair. As the brassy reverberations faded from the room the councilors took their seats in the lower chairs that flanked the throne.

At the far end of the chamber a massive door opened and the majordomo entered, striking his staff once on the floor of polished marble. "What is my lord's pleasure?"

"Admit the envoys of Kyaga Strongbow," the Lord of Tarsis

commanded.

The palace official bowed his way out and a bizarre little assemblage bustled through the door. In the lead was a man dressed in verminous goatskins, who strode on short, bowed legs as arrogantly as any prince. His greasy hair hung to his shoulders in a score of plaits. His face was heavily scarred, tattooed with serpentine figures and decorated with a long mustache that drooped over a nearly lipless mouth. His narrow eyes were bright blue, and they dismissed the councilors with easy contempt. He wore a wide, flat hat trimmed with fur, and from its brim dangled hanks of hair that bore a distressing resemblance to human scalps.

Behind him walked a figure even stranger. The man wore garments of tanned deerskin that were covered with amulets; rattling strings of bones both human and animal; tinkling bells; miniature animal figures wrought in bronze and iron; beads of amber, coral, and lapis lazuli. At his belt were a tambourine and a horn, and his head was covered by a tall, conical fur cap from which more strings of beads, bones, and amulets dangled so densely that his face was almost obscured by them.

The rest of the party, a dozen or so men, were typical plains warriors wearing clothing of leather and hairy hide, soft boots with pointed, upturned toes, and wide belts studded with metal and colorful stones. The complexity of their facial tattoos proclaimed their importance, and all of these men had faces made up principally of figures wrought in red, blue, and green, signifying that they were chieftains of rank. None carried weapons, but empty sheaths, quivers, and bow cases were a part of each man's attire, save for the shaman. The majordomo strode forward and rapped his staff on the floor three times. "All hear me!" he cried. "The Lord of Tarsis and the Inner Council receive the embassy of Chief Kyaga Strongbow of the Plains of Dust. Ambassador Yalmuk Bloodarrow has presented his credentials to the Great Council in accordance with the law and custom of Tarsis, and

is recognized as the envoy of Chief Kyaga, with all the privileges of an ambassador." The majordomo bowed and withdrew.

"Ambassador Yalmuk has also presented his sword and dagger, his bow and his sharp, swift-flying arrows," said the envoy. "This is an insult! A warrior of the plains is never to be without his weapons."

With an effort, the Lord of Tarsis bit back a sharp retort to this unprecedented rudeness. "It grieves me that you feel ill-used, but this is the custom of our court. Do foreigners come armed into the presence of your master?"

"Of course not!" Yalmuk snorted. "But my master, Kyaga Strongbow, is lord of the world and may order men to do as he wishes, for that is his right." The rest of his party gave loud assent to these words.

"It is clear," said the Lord of Tarsis, "that matters of rank must be cleared up before we can proceed with negotiations."

"Who spoke of negotiations?" demanded Yalmuk. "I come here with my chieftain's orders!"

"Then you must understand," said the Lord of Tarsis in a low voice from which all patience had fled, "that I will, upon no account, deal with your master under such a misapprehension. It is the custom of all lands, including those of the nomadic tribes, for sovereigns to deal with one another as equals. I will recognize your chief's embassy upon no other grounds."

"As it happens," said Yalmuk, his snubbed nose elevated, "my chieftain has given me permission to abide by this pretense for the nonce. He therefore calls you brother and colleague."

"Excellent," said the lord with the thinnest of smiles. As he had suspected, this bullying little blowhard had been testing him, seeing how much he could get away with before the whip was snapped. It was a common tactic. Civilized envoys were just more subtle about it. "Please state the requests of

my brother, Chief Kyaga Strongbow."

"The demands of Kyaga Strongbow are as follows: Wherefore in the past it has been the custom of the plainsmen to come to Tarsis and barter the rich products of our herds for the trifling commodities of this city, henceforth Tarsis shall render as tribute, to be sent to the court of Kyaga Strongbow each year on the Feast of the Longest Day, one thousand worked saddles of the best wood and leather, one thousand swords of wrought steel, one thousand daggers of the same, ten thousand arrowheads of the same, one thousand bolts of woven silk, ten thousand bolts of woven wool, and ten thousand steel coins."

For a moment there was a stunned silence.

"I see," said the lord. "Quite aside from the fact that this is out of the question, does it occur to Kyaga that it is difficult to produce woven wool without the raw wool from the plains?"

The envoy waved a hand dismissively. From his wrist dangled a flexible quirt. "You shall of course be free to buy our wool as in the past. Only the price is changed. It was one ounce of fine silver per hundredweight. The new price is ten ounces."

"These demands are quite unacceptable," said the Lord of Tarsis, sounding almost bored. "We see no reason why the ancient relations between our city and your people should not go on as they have for many centuries. However, should you feel that our rates of exchange are no longer fair, we are prepared to negotiate."

"You mistake the intentions of Kyaga Strongbow," said the ambassador. "He does not wish to negotiate. You may accept his terms, or you may face war, siege, and extermination!" His followers cheered fiercely.

"I quite understand," said the lord. "But we must talk further. In the meantime, I have set aside tomorrow for a great feast to celebrate the arrival of the first embassy from the new ruler of the plains."

"We accept your invitation," Yalmuk said. "But do not talk too long. In three risings of the sun my chief arrives in our camp, and if he is not satisfied with your response, he will destroy Tarsis!" The ambassador then spun on his booted heel and strode from the audience chamber. When the doors had closed behind the barbarians, the councilors muttered among themselves.

"Did I hear aright?" said Councilor Rukh. "Did that flea-bitten savage just demand our unconditional submission and tribute?"

"Calm yourself," said the lord. "This is just a trade negotiation. This new nomad chief has simply put his most outrageous demand on the table first. That way, he can seem generous and reasonable when he demands something marginally less absurd."

"My lord," said Councilor Melkar, "I think you misjudge Kyaga. I believe he means every word of it. Preparations must be made at once to defend the city."

"I have already ordered such preparations. But I think they will not be necessary. Tomorrow, at the banquet, commence the subversion of these simple savages. We have three days to bribe them away from their chief. That should be more than adequate."

The Lord of Tarsis looked about the festively decorated hall, pleased with his strategy. The banquet was going well, all things considered. The savages stuffed themselves without decorum, boasted loudly, and smelled abominable, but so far there had been no overt acts of violence. Guards stood around the periphery of the banqueting hall with polearms at the ready, but the lord had little faith in these. Tarsis had few military men of any account, and the city guards were merely a constabulary, poorly trained and inefficient.

All the members of the Inner Council, unmasked now and smiling as if they were among their closest friends, had one or more of the envoys sitting near them. Farther down the table, other, lesser lords and ladies of the city feasted

merrily.

Beside the Lord of Tarsis sat Yalmuk Bloodarrow and the shaman, whom the lord had learned was called Shadespeaker. The shaman communed with the dead, as well as with the thousands of spirits, small gods, and major deities of the plainsmen. It seemed the man was a person of great importance among the nomads, for he always stayed close to Yalmuk and in some ways the ambassador seemed to defer to him. The Lord of Tarsis felt that the shaman might be a man to cultivate. The problem was, with what did one bribe a shaman?

"Holy Shadespeaker," said the lord, "is it by the will of your gods that Kyaga Strongbow has been elevated to the overlordship of the Plains of Dust?"

The man regarded him through the strings of dangling beads. His face was even harder to read because it had been painted a vivid green. "The spirits of all our ancestors came to me and proclaimed that Kyaga was indeed the one prophesied to us."

"Ah, I see. So it was through you that he became chief?"

"Through the ancestors," said the shaman, "and through his own might. He brought many tribes under his lordship through many years of fighting."

"How splendid." This looked promising. If the shaman felt that it was through his intercession with the spirits that Kyaga was elevated, he might feel himself the equal of the new leader. He would be resentful if the chieftain paid him insufficient honor. "Your lord must value you above all other men."

"My lord listens when I speak," said the holy man.

"He listens to his wizard," chimed in Yalmuk. "But Kyaga knows that his glory rests on swords and bows and the hearts of his warriors!" He set his teeth into a venison pasty and washed it down with half a beaker of strong wine.

"A chief must have warriors," the shaman said, "but the greatest bowmen are of no use to him if he has not the favor

of the gods and the ancestors."

"As you say, Shadespeaker," Yalmuk muttered. A few minutes later Yalmuk excused himself from the table, and the lord was able to speak confidentially to the shaman.

"I think the ambassador considers himself to be your better," commented the lord.

Shadespeaker drummed his fingertips against the taut rawhide of his tambourine. "He is a great tribal chief, second only to my lord, who values him above all others."

"Surely that place belongs to you, the man who elevated him and made plain to all the tribes that he is their rightful leader."

"Kyaga Strongbow chooses as he will," said the shaman sullenly. "It is not for ordinary men to question him."

"Of course not," said the lord. "But here in Tarsis, we accord honor as it is deserved." As he spoke these words Yalmuk returned to the table.

In time the shaman departed to join a group of court ladies who were interested in his tribal lore, and the Lord of Tarsis found himself temporarily alone with the ambassador.

"Your holy man seems to think highly of himself," the lord said.

"Those spirit-speakers are mostly frauds," grumbled the man, bleary-eyed from all the wine he had drunk. "They do no work, they own no herds, they do not fight, yet they think they can live easy and have the respect of real men."

"I quite agree. You will notice that priests have no say in the affairs of Tarsis. We let them tend to the service of the gods while men of wealth and war direct the affairs of our city. I understand that you are the chieftain of a great tribe. It must vex you to see so much honor go to a mere shaman instead of to a worthy man like yourself."

Yalmuk shook his head. "I would never dispute the decisions of my chief. He is not as other men."

"Of course not. You are a man of great loyalty. I, more than any other, know how valuable are men of honor. While I

know full well that you would never betray your chief, this shaman could succeed in turning him against you. Such men can never stand to see others too high in the favor of their chieftain. Should that happen, know that you have a place here in Tarsis."

"I have no worries on that account," said the ambassador, but he clearly lacked conviction.

As the banquet came to a close, the Lord of Tarsis was very pleased with the poison he had spread.

Late the next day, the members of the Inner Council sat in their accustomed places as each tendered his report to the lord. Councilor Rukh was first to speak.

"My lord, I entertained three of the envoys at my own house, the ambassador and two chiefs named Guklak and Shatterspear. Ambassador Yalmuk has his resentments, but on the whole I perceive him as loyal to his chief. Guklak is fanatically loyal to Kyaga. Shatterspear, on the other hand, is ripe for rebellion. Kyaga defeated him in battle and incorporated his tribe into the greater nation. Shatterspear resents this usurpation of his own leadership. Also, he is stupid and a wastrel, very greedy for gold. He can be had for a few coins."

"Very good," said the lord, keeping to himself his own doubts about the loyalty of Ambassador Yalmuk. He likewise kept to himself his doubts about Councilor Rukh's report. Whatever had passed between the ambitious aristocrat and the nomads, Rukh would report it in whatever form would serve to advance his own schemes. The Lord of Tarsis knew he could credit only information confirmed by a number of sources, including that tendered by spies of his own planted in each noble household. He heard out the others, and each had much the same report.

"This is excellent," said the lord when all had spoken.

"Among the envoys, the breakdown seems to be roughly thus: one third are extremely loyal to Kyaga, one third are wavering, and one third are ready to rebel at the hint of a

bribe. With this knowledge, we can begin to undermine Kyaga. It is almost certain that the bulk of his subchiefs, who even now gather on the plain outside our gates, are similarly chancy of loyalty. I shall draw out negotiations as long as possible, while you continue subverting his chiefs. Give them plenty of gifts. Promise them honors and titles, for these cost us nothing. Promise them gold and other treasure, even Tarsian women as wives and concubines. Payment can always be deferred."

"Kyaga Strongbow arrives upon the morrow, my lord," reminded Councilor Melkar. "He may be in no mood for negotiation."

"If not, defensive arrangements will be in order," assured the Lord of Tarsis.

"My lord," said Councilor Alban, an old man notorious for his many superstitions, "my star-reader warns me that a grim future awaits Tarsis. He says that the signs are in place for a war of armies and sorcerers and dragons. Might this shaman of Kyaga's command powerful magic? If so, what steps should we take to ward off his spells?"

It was a struggle for the lord to hide his disgust. He had little patience with Alban, but the man was immensely wealthy and had to be reckoned with. Wizards! Dragons! Things of history and legend! What had these to do with war and diplomacy in the modern world? Still, he spoke soothingly.

"Councilor Alban, I have spoken with the man and find him a mere, ignorant tribesman. I have also consulted with merchants who have traveled extensively among the nomads. All assure me that the tribal shamans are no more than fraudulent mountebanks. They say they commune with the dead, but what of that? Is a dead savage somehow more dangerous than a live one?" This raised a chuckle from the council. "Beyond that, they practice petty arts of healing and cursing. Some of these require no magic at all; some are spells of the weakest sort. If the nomads knew any great sorcery, would they not have mastered the world long ago?"

"These are wise observations," Alban allowed, "yet the possibility exists that something may have changed. I have received disturbing reports, my lords. Sentries atop the walls have reported sightings of a strange apparition in the skies: a vast, winged creature, accompanied by a sound of great wings beating. My staff of wizards affirm that this may be a true dragon of the Great Wyrms class. If so, this portends great shocks and changes."

The Lord of Tarsis sighed. This was just what he did not need at such a time. Why was he forced to deal with such an idiot? He answered his own question silently. Because he is rich and powerful, that is why. Aloud he said, "My esteemed councilor, I must remind you that no dragon of any status whatever has been seen in these parts for generations. Moreover, most of the guards on our walls are foreign mercenaries, men of the most primitive and superstitious sort. They are liable to see dragons in every storm cloud just as they see dryads in every forest shadow and ghosts in every darkened room." This raised a restrained chuckle from the others. "Nevertheless," he continued, "we must overlook nothing. Pray continue your researches as you deem best."

"If all here agree, I shall assemble a body of the most learned men of Tarsis to map out a strategy of counterspells."

"Please do so, Councilor Alban," said the lord. At least it would keep the old fool out of his way while he attended to the real business of diplomacy. "Now, to other business. Is all ready to receive Kyaga Strongbow when he arrives tomorrow?"

"The honor guard is assembled and has been drilled, my lord," reported Councilor Rukh. "The musicians are practicing even now. The dried flower petals left over from the last reception are arranged in baskets on the balconies for the ladies to cast down. If he had come in the summer this savage could have been showered with fresh petals, but it seems he has no sense of timing." This raised another

chuckle and Councilor Rukh continued. "Seriously, my lord, a procession through the narrower streets presents an excellent opportunity to rid ourselves of this would-be master of the world. One arrow and he is gone. Without their leader, the nomads would dissolve into a mob to be massacred piecemeal."

The Lord of Tarsis nodded. "It is a very tempting opportunity, and I have pondered just such a tactic since learning that the savage was on his way. It would be in violation of all diplomatic custom, but that would not stay my hand. After all, it is not as if he were a civilized king. No, I have other reasons for rejecting the idea. First, because I do not think he represents a threat serious enough to warrant a move so drastic. Second, we do not yet know enough about the nature of the army assembling outside our gates. Third, it has been our traditional, well-proven policy always to set these nomad tribes one against the other, rather than take direct action ourselves. Until I am satisfied upon all these matters, we will rely on prolonged negotiation and subversion. Do all understand?"

"Yes, my lord," all chorused.

"Then go and do as I have instructed." He turned and strode from the room.

That night, satisfied he had prepared for any possibility, the Lord of Tarsis retired to his bed. He was not to get a good night's sleep.

"My lord!" The panicked cry was accompanied by loud and prolonged pounding. "My lord, wake up!"

The Lord of Tarsis sat up in his bed and wiped a hand across his face, trying to clear away the cobwebs of sleep. "What is it?" he barked. It seemed he had just laid his head on the pillow.

"You must come quickly, my lord! There's been a murder!"

Now he recognized the visitor's voice. Constable Weite was commander of the night watch, a dubious post for one who

was afraid of his own shadow. "And what causes this one to warrant my attention?" the Lord of Tarsis demanded. His tone boded ill for one who would disturb his rest over trifles.

"It is the ambassador of the savages, my lord, the one they call Yalmuk Bloodarrow!"

At that news the lord rose from his bed and strode to the door, yanking it open. The constable rushed into the room, accompanied by a servant who wordlessly set about dressing his master with practiced efficiency.

"It was the end of the third night watch, my lord. The harbor squad had just finished their sweep of the old waterfront and were returning to the Hall of Justice with a chain of arrested malefactors ..."

The lord interpreted these official-sounding words with the ease of long experience. The guards had been drinking in one of the all-night taverns and were coming in with their required quota of arrests. These would have been drunks helpfully supplied by the tavern keepers. The night watch only arrested drunks and left the rampaging, warring street gangs strictly alone. All the constabulary was really good for was raising the alarm in case of fire in the night.

". .. when they heard a great uproar coming from the plaza."

"Which plaza?" asked the lord patiently. Weite was a typical constable, which meant he was a little slow even when sober.

"The plaza before the Hall of Justice, my lord. There was a crowd gathered around the statue of Abushmulum the Ninth."

"What was a crowd doing in the plaza at that hour?"

"The Tavern of the Bottomless Barrel had just let out, my lord. It is located just behind the statue. The body lay at the statue's feet."

"Has it been moved?"

"No, my lord. One of the watch ran to the Hall of Justice and informed me of the matter and I posted a guard around the body, then came here immediately to inform your lordship."

"You were in the Hall of Justice and did not notice the crowd outside?"

"They were on the far side of the plaza, my lord," Weite said imperturbably, "and the walls are very thick."

Not as thick as your skull, thought the Lord of Tarsis.

"Constable Weite," he said, "I am going to examine the scene myself. Be assured I can find my own way to the Hall of Justice. While I am doing this, I want you to send a runner to each gate of the city. The guardians of the gates are to be informed that they are under no circumstances to allow anyone to leave the city this night, and in the morning they are not to open the gates as usual. The gates shall not be opened until I expressly order it. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, my lord!"

"Then go and do my bidding."

Chest inflated to its greatest extent, Constable Weite drew himself up to attention, saluted smartly, spun on his booted heel, and clumped out of the bedchamber.

The Lord of Tarsis, disturbed by the murder and the consequences it might bring, left soon after. As he walked through the gloomy streets, flanked by guards bearing torches and lanterns, he feared greatly that his precaution was far too late. He was less concerned that the murderer might escape than that word should reach the nomad camp that their ambassador had been murdered within the city.

He did not seriously fear war with the nomads, but he did not want war to come before he was ready for it.

He found a sizable crowd gathered shivering in the snowy plaza before the Hall of Justice. Like so much of the city, the plaza, once splendid, was now dingy and ill-maintained; the facades of the facing buildings stained with time and soot; the flagstones chipped, pitted, or missing entirely; the statues worn and vandalized. Typical of the latter was the statue of Abushmulum the Ninth, a king of the long-ago time when Tarsis had had kings, so long ago that nobody knew why he had rated a statue. Certainly nothing else was

known about him.

A ring of city guards encircled the base of the statue, facing inward, their poleaxes held at port arms. Within the circle of guards stood a group of late drinkers, most of them looking sobered by the cold and the situation. Few of them had the look of native Tarsians. Most were plainly travelers from elsewhere.

"Have any of the witnesses left the scene?" the lord demanded of the ranking guardsman.

"Not since we arrived, my lord," the man answered.

"Very good. Take them over to the Hall of Justice and lock them in the dungeon to await questioning." Immediately, some of the huddled drinkers began to protest. "Any that give you trouble you may kill," said the lord. The protests stilled instantly.

The guards and the tavern crowd clumped off across the plaza leaving scores of dirty footprints in the snow. When they were gone the lord turned his attention to the still figure they left behind.

"Torches here," the lord commanded. With suitable illumination thus provided, he studied the bizarre sight.

The body lay on the base of the statue, which was a block of hewn marble the height of the lord's eyes, and the Lord of Tarsis was a tall man. The corpse rested on its

back with the booted feet protruding beyond the edge of the pedestal, snow slowly gathering on the pointed, upturned toes. The face of Yalmuk Bloodarrow bore a look of great distress, which was understandable considering the great gash that lay across his throat all the way to the spine. Blood, now slowly freezing, had cascaded down the face of the pedestal. The stream ended at the fur-trimmed hat, which lay trampled and bedraggled on the pavement. Yalmuk's hands were atop his chest, the fingers clawed like those of a cat fighting on its back.

Above the corpse towered the statue of Abushmulum the Ninth. The old king stood crowned and wrapped in his royal

mantle. It seemed to the lord that, judging from the king's expression, he was embarrassed to be caught in such company.

"Get this carrion down and take it to the palace," the lord ordered. "Turn it over to the official embalmers and tell them to prepare the corpse the same as they would for a state funeral. He was an ambassador, even if he was only a barbarian and a nomad. His chief may want the body back."

As his guards did his bidding, the Lord of Tarsis studied the pedestal. How had the murderer lifted the body so high? The late Yalmuk had been burly and heavysset. It was a job for an exceptionally strong man. Or else there had been more than one murderer. No matter. What was important was that the fool Yalmuk had shown the great discourtesy of getting himself killed within the walls of Tarsis, as if he had deliberately wanted to dishonor the city and its lord. It was intolerable.

To make matters worse, Kyaga Strongbow was due to arrive on the morrow, and he would surely demand to know what had happened to his ambassador. Was there any real hope that he would not learn about the murder?

The Lord of Tarsis knew these to be vain thoughts.

Travelers had thronged the Tavern of the Bottomless Barrel, and many of them, having seen the body, might have hurried away to the nomad camp to spread the news. Under his war security orders nobody was allowed to pass through the gates after nightfall, but that probably meant that the cost of a bribe to pass had gone up from one copper to two. Had there been any real likelihood that the murder might be kept hushed up, he would have kept all the witnesses under arrest and dumped the body outside the walls. As it was, such a course of action would only make things worse.

As he strode toward the Hall of Justice and a rigorous interrogation of the witnesses, it seemed to the lord that a shadow passed across him, darkening the slushy, grayish plaza. He looked upward, and for an instant he fancied he

saw something flickering, as of a long serpentine shape darting into a cloud bank. Unexpectedly, he felt a great, unexplained sense of dread fall over him. He looked back and saw the statue of Abushmulum, distance and uncanny light and perhaps something else lending it almost a semblance of life. The old king seemed to glare at him in anger, as if blaming him for the sorry state of the once glorious city.

The lord shook himself as if to dislodge this illogical mood. I am allowing these peculiar events and the maun-derings of that magic-besotted fool Alban unhinge me, he told himself. There is something wrong. But why, he wondered as he gazed at the likeness of Abushmulum, did the killer haul that corpse up to the base of the statue?

Chapter Four

The sound of drums came to them, drifting across the dry harbor bottom, from beyond the walls of the city. The two men stood on the deck of the old hulk, leaning against its ornately carved quarterdeck railing. All around them, smoke drifted from the other inhabited hulks in wind-driven wisps.

"The nomads are getting impatient," Ironwood said, his eyes slitted against the cutting wind. "They want to fight or move on. It's not in their nature to stay in one place, doing nothing."

"There have been rumors," Nistur said. "Rumors of a new chief who has united the tribes."

"They are more than rumors. I've been hearing reports for the last three years of this man who calls himself Kyaga Strongbow, and I've seen towns on the desert fringe that he's sacked."

Nistur shrugged. "Any pack of scruffy bandits can loot a defenseless town. It takes more to threaten a city like this."

"I've heard something else," Ironwood added. "Shell-ring came here this morning. She says that the lord's officers are recruiting mercenaries, as many of them as they can hire, and offering good wages."

Nistur cut a sharp glance toward him. "What a pity you are in no condition to seek employment."

"I am almost recovered!" Ironwood insisted. "The weakness always passes after two or three days. I am fit for duty now."

"And yet, even so, would it be wise to hire on at this juncture? The masters of Tarsis are entirely wanting in a reputation for fair dealing."

"A mercenary who waits to be hired by a lord of sterling character will soon starve. They always balk when the final payday comes around, but they always pay, because they fear us. If they had the means to control their mercenaries, they'd have had no need to hire warriors in the first place."

"You know the customs of your profession," Nistur allowed, "but surely it is a good idea to be on the winning side. Is it likely that great mob of nomads can prevail against Tarsis?"

"I've not inspected the defenses of the city," Ironwood confessed. "I never thought to be hired here. Tarsis is a place where mercenaries stay between wars. Many of the recruiters pass through here, and a fighting man rarely has to wait long for employment after he's spent his pay."

"But to answer your question: the nomads fight mainly as horse archers. As such they are formidable on open ground. Because they are excellent bowmen, they can move fast and keep their distance while filling the air with arrows. At close quarters they are fair lancers and middling swordsmen. Such warriors are rarely able to take a walled, defended town. For that you need siegecraft. You must have skilled tunnelers and builders of mantelets and rams and catapults. The nomads scorn such things. Defending a city such as this may mean nothing more than manning the walls until the nomads lose interest and ride away."

"Perhaps," Nistur said dubiously. "But it is a city of merchants, and such persons are rarely inclined to part with their money for any reasons save fear and desperation."

"I am going," Ironwood insisted. "Whether or not it's an easy war, I won't stay here and live on the old man's charity."

Nistur sighed with resignation. "Then I have no choice save to go with you." Absentmindedly he scratched beneath his beard, where the mark of Ironwood's ring tingled faintly.

The mercenary favored him with a humorless smile. "If you didn't wish to become the bondsman of a mercenary, you shouldn't have taken a contract to kill one. Cheer up, Nistur. Falling under a geas is far from the worst that could have happened."

"That remains to be seen," the ex-assassin muttered.

* * * * *

The sign above the door of the tavern consisted of a pair of crossed swords. The two men ducked beneath the low lintel and entered the dim, smoky interior. It was only midmorning, but the place was packed with armed warriors, most of them wearing oddments of mismatched armor, the sure sign of mercenaries who picked up their equipment as needed from the battlefields of many lands. They also tended to sell it off a piece at a time for living money between hires and buy more secondhand when a new war was in the offing. Ironwood's dragon suit was a great rarity.

At one end of the long room, with his back to a hearth fire, sat a recruiting officer with a parchment scroll and a gold-nibbed pen. Beside him sat a city accountant with an iron-banded chest and an array of steel coins ranged before him in stacks of five. Lined up before the recruiter were mercenaries standing in a patient file. As the name of each was registered, the accountant dropped five of the coins into a waiting palm.

"Five steels for sign-up pay," Ironwood mused. "Not bad."

"And it costs the Lord of Tarsis practically nothing," said his companion. "How so?"

"The mercenaries will spend almost all of it here in Tarsis, mostly at the taverns. The lord will levy a special tax to pay for the war, with the greater part of it falling on the tavern keepers. Thus these coins will flow right back into his coffers."

"True," Ironwood said. "It is always at the final payout that they balk." He got in line behind a man who wore a studded leather cuirass from which hung short sleeves of bronze mail. "Often as not, they stop paying around the middle of the campaign, then promise to settle up all the back pay when the fighting is over. That is when you must speak sharply to them."

"It is unfortunate that persons of honor must sometimes deal with the ignoble."

In time they reached the head of the line. The recruiting officer lost his bored look when he scanned Ironwood's armor and weapons. "Well, here's a likely prospect. Your friend doesn't look like a soldier, though."

"Nor am I," said Nistur. "I am a poet."

"He's handier with a sword than he looks, I can assure you," Ironwood told him.

"Well, I think I can trust your judgment," said the recruiter.

"You have the look of an officer."

"I've been a captain of foot in a half-dozen armies."

"Excellent! I recruit for Shagbar's regiment, and he has need of experienced captains. The rank carries double pay. Your name?"

"Ironwood."

The recruiter's pen, fresh-dipped in green ink, paused above the parchment. "Ironwood? I have heard that name."

"So has everyone else," said a man wearing an old bronze breastplate and an even older iron helm. "He's a cursed man, and no one will serve under him." Others growled their assent.

"Is it true?" asked the recruiter. "Are you that Ironwood?"

"I am he, but I bear no curse. It is—"

The recruiter held up a palm. "Peace, say no more. I have questions of morale to consider, you understand. I cannot hire one who will make the others distrustful and therefore less effective. It is nothing personal."

"Aye, nothing personal," Ironwood said. He whirled and

stalked from the tavern, his face flaming.

"Well," said Nistur, relieved, "so much for that. Now, why don't we return to the ship and get warm, then make some traveling plans?"

"I know no trade save war," Ironwood said. "It would be the same story elsewhere. Come, there are other recruiters."

With an exasperated sigh, Nistur gathered his cloak around him and followed.

By late afternoon they had been turned down in a half-score of taverns. Ironwood's reputation preceded him everywhere. Nobody could say for certain what was wrong with him, but no one wished to serve with an unlucky man. Finally, in desperation, they turned their steps down a filthy alleyway. At its end was a low, narrow doorway. Above the door was mounted a human skull with the hilt of a dagger protruding from one of its eye sockets.

"Is this wise?" Nistur demanded. "This morning all the regiments of repute rejected us. Each of those we have tried this afternoon was less savory than the last. Surely whoever recruits in this noisome dive leads nothing but bandits and gallows-cheaters."

"Wise?" said Ironwood in a voice of almost demented bitterness. "Who speaks of wisdom? I must have employment and surely, somewhere in this city, there must be a band desperate enough to hire one such as I!"

"My friend," Nistur demurred, "I must admonish you that mutual desperation is not the best of bonds between warrior and chief."

"We waste time," said Ironwood. He had to turn slightly to get his wide shoulders through the narrow doorway.

The two entered the tavern, and Nistur saw, instantly, that the warriors within lived down to the very worst of his misgivings. Even the flickering, smoky light of the oil lamps was insufficient to disguise the brands, the cropped ears and tattooed faces whereby a score of lands distinguished their felons. On two or three he even descried the neck scars of

unsuccessful hangings. Few had any armor to speak of, and their weapons consisted of little more than long daggers, notch-edged hatchets, and a few short swords. They looked none the less dangerous for their dearth of panoply.

The man at the recruiting table looked no less villainous than the rest, and only slightly better dressed and equipped. The clerk who sat beside him wore a glum expression, and the coins before him were stacked in threes. These two were not recruiting for an elite regiment.

The recruiter studied the newcomers with eyes reddened by smoke and drink. "Names?"

"Ironwood. I—" He broke off short when the recruiter brayed with laughter. "What do you find amusing?" he said, his voice low and menacing.

"Amusing? It's riotous! None can accuse me of being overly picky, but even I am not so hard up that I will sign on a man with a reputation for bringing bad luck and disaster wherever he goes. Why, if I—" The words were cut off with a strangled squawk as Ironwood's fingers closed around the man's burly, unwashed neck. With a strength surprising in one so recently laid low, he raised the man from his bench and thrust him against the stone wall, where the back of his head struck with a vicious smack.

"Hard up for men, are you?" Ironwood bellowed. "Do you think me so desperate that I'll be insulted by a lowborn bandit corporal like you? What do they hire your band for, killing the wounded and going through their purses after better men have done the fighting?"

With an inarticulate snarl the recruiter drew his dagger and darted it toward Ironwood's midriff, but Nistur drew the dirk from his right boot and applied a neat, precise cut to the inside of the man's wrist. Instantly, the dagger dropped from his nerveless fingers.

"No need for a battle when an object lesson will do," said the former assassin.

"Kill them!" the recruiter squealed, seeking with one hand to

stanch the bleeding.

Eager to please their paymaster, the ragged mercenaries jumped toward the two unwanted intruders, both of whom had their weapons clear in an instant. Nistur punched one attacker in the face with the boss of his small shield and dealt a similar clout to the jaw of another, using the steel basket hilt of his sword. Ironwood was fending off two more with his own curved sword and dagger.

From the corner of his eye, Nistur saw the barkeep dashing out through the door. It was time to leave. Even with their relatively short weapons the quarters were too cramped to fight effectively.

"Let's go!" Nistur said. "It is far too crowded here, and the watch will be coming shortly!" He drove off an attacker with a neat cut to the knee and made another fall back by cracking him across the nose with the edge of his shield.

"Break for it!" Ironwood said. "I'll cover your back."

Nistur gave him no argument. The mercenary's armor gave him a considerable advantage in such a rear-guard action, one that the ex-assassin wholly lacked. The instant he reached the door he darted into the alley outside and shouted, "Through!" A moment later Ironwood squeezed past, bleeding slightly from a nick high on one cheekbone.

"Time to be on our way," Nistur said. They dashed up the alley as men began to boil from the tavern, only to come to a skidding halt as they reached the street beyond. Around the mouth of the alley stood a dozen men with a chest-high net stretched between them. Behind these stood others with polearms balanced at shoulder height.

"In the name of the Lord of Tarsis," intoned a man wearing the gorget of an officer, "surrender your arms and come with us to the Hall of Justice!"

Ironwood snorted. "Since when did the city watch begin to show such zeal?"

"Since our lord laid the city under military discipline,

foreigner. Surrender your arms now!"

Ironwood turned to Nistur. "He means he wants a bribe. Do you have any money? The price of a couple of ales will do."

"My friend, I do not think—"

"Bag them!" shouted the officer. Instantly, the watchmen threw their net over the two men. The pursuing mercenaries had faded back into the tavern by this time. Ironwood and Nistur struggled briefly, but within a few minutes they were trussed up, disarmed, and being dragged off to the well-peopled dungeons beneath the Hall of Justice.

"They are an amazingly inefficient force of men," Nistur observed as he felt about his clothing, satisfying himself that he yet retained his small dagger and several other unobtrusive weapons disposed about his person. "It escapes me how they can find all one's money while missing concealed weapons."

"It's because they want your money, and they don't care if you kill yourself or your fellow prisoners," Ironwood informed him. The two men sat on the straw-covered floor of a windowless cell that held a dozen more wretches, some of them showing the marks of severe beatings and torture of moderate severity. "The only reason they didn't take my armor is that it would fit none of them. But they'll find a buyer soon."

"If you had not been so precipitate in seeking employment," Nistur chided, "we would not be in this predicament."

"I wish the two of you would shut up," groaned one of their cellmates. "At least you were caught disturbing the peace. We did nothing at all." The man held a handful of bloody straw pressed against the side of his mouth, as if to stanch bleeding.

"I daresay," Nistur remarked. "I have never been in a jail that held any save innocent prisoners. Such is always the claim, anyway. What was the nature of your incredible misfortune, my friend? Did a cutpurse drop that stolen money bag in your tunic, unbeknownst to you, getting rid of the evidence?"

"

"I once knew a man," Ironwood said, "who'd been caught in an alley crouched over a corpse with one hand on the dagger and the other rummaging under the wretch's clothes. He swore to the judge that he'd found the poor, unfortunate

fellow lying there. When the watch arrived he was just trying to pull out the dagger while feeling for a pulse."

This raised a weak laugh from the prisoners in their cell and those nearby, but another of their cellmates said, "No, he speaks the truth. We were just minding our own business in the Tavern of the Bottomless Barrel when it closed up. Outside we were milling around when somebody yelled that there was a body on the base of a statue in front of the tavern. We were looking it over when the night watch arrived and held us there. Then who should show up but the Lord of Tarsis himself!"

"The lord and his police have been working us over ever since," said another. "They want to know who we saw and what we heard. But nobody saw or heard anything of importance. That doesn't make them happy, so each time we're questioned they beat us a little harder. It'll be the rack and hot irons before long."

"Why so much fuss over a murder?" Nistur asked. "Was it someone important?"

"It was one of the nomads," said the first speaker. "Someone said he was their ambassador."

"No wonder the nomads are beating their drums," Ironwood mused. "That's the sort of thing that would put them in a bad temper. How was he killed?"

"Throat cut," said a man in the clothing of a traveling merchant. "We heard some shouting, but that was all. Who notices such things? Next time I see a corpse in a foreign city, I'm getting away as fast as I can."

"A wise course," commended Nistur.

They passed time discussing their various sad fates until

feeding time arrived and they were served thin gruel from a wooden bucket. By this time, all knew better than to complain. Sometime in what they judged to be late evening, they were distracted by the sounds of someone being hustled down the stone corridor toward the cells.

"No need for that! Keep your hands to yourself!" The voice seemed familiar to Nistur. "Forget it! You've already taken everything I had!"

Then the speaker was standing before the door to their cell. As Nistur had thought, it was Shellring. The guard behind her wore the black tunic and hood that was the uniform of the Hall of Justice jail staff.

"This is the one I want," she said in a low voice as the turnkey unlocked the cuffs that bound her wrists. With her hands freed, she turned slightly away while the door was unlocked. When she turned back she pressed something into the guard's palm. Then he pushed her through and locked the door behind her.

"Well," she said, smiling brightly, "look who I've found!"

"You must not be a very good thief," Ironwood said, "to be caught at your work twice in just a few days."

"I was caught because I wanted to be!" she insisted.

"Perhaps this is an obvious question," Nistur said, "but just why do you prefer incarceration in this dungeon to freedom?"

"I came to find you two, of course," she said, taking a seat on the straw.

"I confess I am touched," Nistur said. "But, why?"

"It wasn't really my idea," she confessed. "I heard that you'd been arrested and told Stunbog. He's worried that you'll die down here because you don't know how the place works. He said I should look after you."

"I'm grateful that the man treated my—my illness," Ironwood grumbled, "but I didn't ask him to take me on as a permanent charge. I need no nursemaid."

She gave him a sardonic look. "Aye, certainly not. A mighty

warrior like you is equal to anything."

"No need for sarcasm," said Nistur. "I assure you, we appreciate your concern. This place, I take it, is familiar to you?"

"More than familiar," she affirmed. "I've spent a good part of my life here."

"Then you're lucky," said one of the merchants. "Most places, they cut off hands for repeated stealing."

"I'm always good for a bribe," she said. "Guards don't mistreat a source of steady income."

"Speaking of which," said Nistur, "where did you conceal the coin with which you just bribed your way into this cell?"

"There are some things you shouldn't ask," she said primly.

* * * * *

The Lord of Tarsis dismounted at the base of the battle-mented tower that flanked the northern side of the East Gate. From beyond the gate he could hear the rumble of drums that had been causing near panic in the city all day. During his ride through the city he had been exasperated at the terror in the eyes of the citizenry. People who, the day before, had shown nothing but contempt for the desert barbarians were now upset by a little noise. It was absurd.

As he climbed the winding stairway the thick walls of the tower provided a blessed silence, but it was not to last. When he stepped out onto the parapet that ran atop the gate, the sound roared forth with magnified intensity, seeming to shake the very stones of the wall. Parapet and towers were heavily manned with city guards and, more effectively, with elite mercenaries. They made a brave show, but he was all too aware that large sections of the semiruinous walls were all but unmanned, and even over the thunder of the drums he could hear the higher-pitched hammering of the carpenters and blacksmiths who sought frantically to put the war engines mounted on the wall platforms back into fighting order after years of neglect.

He strode toward the speaking platform erected above the

center of the gate, cursing the penny-pinching policies of the merchant-dominated senate that had allowed the defenses of the city to fall into such a state of decrepitude. That he himself had acquiesced in these policies did not in the least detract from his fury.

As he mounted the wooden platform the trumpeters ranged alongside it raised their gleaming instruments and blared out a shrill fanfare that cut through the bass beat of the drums.

Standing thus, in full view of the savage army below, and above the protection of the battlement, the Lord of Tarsis felt utterly exposed. But certain things were expected of one who would rule, and he showed no distress. Besides, certain sharp-eyed men were detailed to scan for incoming missiles, and his bodyguards were ready to yank him to safety at first sign of arrow, bolt, or stone directed toward his person.

Abruptly, the driving rhythm of the drums ceased. There was a stirring in the nomad army below. Flags and standards began to move, and as they did the lord studied the spectacle. There seemed to be at least twice as many warriors, beasts, and tents as there had been but two days before. He surmised that Kyaga had arrived with reinforcements. That was not good.

The nomads were a colorful lot, their animals draped with striped, checked, and particolored bardings in riotous hues. The warriors themselves wore bright robes, their helmets wreathed in scarves, their faces veiled to the eyes as they waved their long, curved swords overhead. Pennons fluttered from their lance tips as well, but the lord was aware that this was but a brave show. Their real weapons, the bows, remained cased on their saddles. When those came out, the show would be over and war would begin in earnest.

Suddenly, as if on a signal, the middle of the nomad army split, men riding to one side or the other, leaving a long, straight corridor with a huge tent at its far end, striped

scarlet and black. The riders lining the corridor faced inward and raised their lances high in salute.

The lord saw two figures, rendered tiny by distance, emerge from the tent. They mounted magnificently barded horses and rode toward the gate with the warriors roaring out their salute in a continuous din. As the two drew nearer, the lord recognized one of the riders as Shadespeaker, the shaman. The other, swathed in a fabulous robe of purple silk embroidered with golden thread, his head scarf and veil of the same precious fabric, could be only one man. Behind him rode an ominous figure who wore a full suit of scale armor, not even his eyes to be seen behind a bronze mask. He held a tall standard topped by the skull of a horned beast. Below this hung a banner flanked by white horsetails. The banner bore the figure of a bird of prey clutching a sword in its talons.

The two figures, backed by the standard-bearer, drew rein before the gate. For the space of a dozen heartbeats there was silence.

"I greet you in peace, Kyaga Strongbow," said the lord, his trained voice carrying easily.

"I do not greet you in peace, Lord of Tarsis!" shouted the purple-robed nomad. "You have murdered my ambassador! This is an offense to me personally, to the nomads of the Plain of Dust, and to the immortal gods! There can be no peace between us until justice is done!"

This was not beginning well. "I am willing to overlook your discourtesy. The killing of an envoy is a serious matter. But I assure you that I had no part in it, and that I shall find the murderer or murderers. This misfortune need not interrupt the negotiations between us."

"Misfortune? You do not yet know the meaning of the word, Lord of Tarsis, but you shall! For this insult, I will level your city to the ground, slay all its inhabitants, plow up the ground, and sow it with salt so that nothing will grow on this site for a hundred years!" At this a ferocious roar of approval

went up from the nomad army.

He doesn't mean it, mused the lord, or he would have attacked at once. Besides, these nomads don't know how to plow. He is looking for a face-saving solution. It is time to bend a little.

"Such a thing, even if you could accomplish it, is far out of proportion to the matter at hand. What would you have of me, my fellow-sovereign?"

"I want the slayers! I want them delivered to me by sunrise five days hence, to be put to death as our customs deem fit." This was better. "Rest assured, they shall be found. I shall deliver them to you personally."

"I will not be gulled!" Kyaga bellowed. "You'll not hand over some corpses and say that these are the murderers, but they were killed upon arrest!"

"By no means. As many as were involved in the killing will be handed over to you whole and fully able to appreciate whatever means of justice you deal them."

"Five days, then. After that, prepare for war! Until I have the killers in my hands, no one will leave Tarsis!"

"Very well, but I want safe conduct for my investigating officers to pass through the gates and enter your camp. There they are to have permission to question your people, regardless of rank."

"Why should I allow that?"

"Because I am not at all convinced that your own people did not murder Yalmuk Bloodarrow! For many days your nomads have been wandering the streets of Tarsis as freely as its citizens. Any one of them might have slain the ambassador."

"That is absurd!" Kyaga cried in an aggrieved voice.

"Nonetheless, no one shall ever have cause to say that Kyaga Strongbow is not both just and gracious. Your officers may come forth, ask any question of anyone of whatever rank, and they will receive honest answers, this I pledge. See that they bear your seal. Any who try to leave the city without one will be slain forthwith."

"Agreed!" shouted the Lord of Tarsis.

"Five days!" called Kyaga. He whirled his horse and rode back to his tent, closely followed by the shaman and the standard-bearer. Throughout the parley, the shaman had said not a single word.

* * * * *

Once again, the Lord of Tarsis sat with his Inner Council. Their masks annoyed him, because they made it difficult for him to read their expressions. Nevertheless, it did not occur to him to demand that they unmask. One did not trifle with tradition.

"I do not see that any real problem exists here, my lord," said Councilor Rukh. "Our jails are full of rogues. Select two or three and turn them over to the savages. The simple barbarians will be satisfied, and the felons will not be missed."

"I doubt Kyaga will be deceived that easily," said the lord.

"Granted our acquaintance was brief, but he struck me as a shrewd man with the way he blustered for his troops but made it clear to me that he is ready to deal and negotiate."

"My esteemed peer Rukh is entirely too brutal and unsubtle," said Councilor Mede, the banker. "Among the populace of Tarsis are a number of quite respectable men who are ruined and deeply in debt to me. Some of them, were I to forgive the debt and in order to save their families, would be willing to confess to the murder. This would be far more convincing than trembling jailbirds."

"Convincing only until the hot irons were applied," said the lord. "Then they would break down and the ruse would be discovered."

"My lord," said Councilor Melkar, "instead of devising elaborate ruses, does it not make sense to simply find out who murdered the barbarian and turn him—or them— over to Kyaga?"

"That would be desirable," the lord admitted, "but it presents difficulties. For one, I have no officers who are

experienced in investigating such a crime. All they know about is customs-dodgers, tax-withholders, and embezzling officials. If tax rolls and bills are not involved, they are hopeless. Also, high personages may be involved, and such are not usually inclined to answer to anyone, much less a low-ranking official."

"I would be most pleased to serve in this capacity," said Rukh smoothly. "Save for yourself, none is higher in rank, and I am quite capable."

You may also be the killer, thought the lord. "I thank you, but if I were to appoint you as investigator it might be said that we are trying to cover up nefarious doings in the council. I do not wish our reputation for fairness, honesty, and justice to be compromised. No, my lords, I shall find an investigator, someone neutral, without ties of blood or fortune to the great houses of Tarsis. Someone eminently capable."

These were fine-sounding words, he thought as the councilors departed. But where was he to find such a person? He glanced at the great hourglass that stood at one end of the room. Already a noticeable portion of his five days had trickled through it.

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"What day is it?" Ironwood asked.

Nistur studied his companion's face. "Either you have a slow-growing beard, or we haven't been here very long at all," he replied irritably.

"Relax," Shellring advised. "You haven't been here half a day yet." She lay on her back with her head resting on interlaced fingers, one knee drawn up and the other leg resting across it. "It's just that time feels different in jail."

"It is not the only thing that feels different," said Nistur, his hand darting beneath his tunic. "The two-legged inhabitants of this place are tolerable. Even the four-legged ones are at least avoidable. The six-legged sort are another matter entirely."

When feeding time came again, Ironwood and Nistur declined to partake. Shellring, far more experienced than they, ate their rations while she chatted with the guards. When she returned to their corner, she wore a thoughtful expression.

"Is there news?" Nistur asked.

"Something funny from the palace," she said.

"Oh, I see," said Ironwood skeptically. "You are privy to the secrets of the palace?"

"You two really don't know how the world works, do you?" she said.

"I once thought I did," said Nistur. "However, I begin to have second thoughts." "Go on," Ironwood said.

"Well, all right," Shellring said, mollified. "You see, the big people like the lord and his councilors and the rich folks talk to each other and they think they're keeping things private, but there are other people all around them. The higher-ups never pay attention to the servants and guards everywhere."

"Remarkable," said Nistur. "And what have the humble ears of the palace heard?"

"That murdered nomad our cellmates found is causing big trouble. The nomad chief is outside the gates with blood in his eyes, demanding vengeance. He gave the lord five days to cough up the killers or he'll invade. I guess it's more like four and a half by now."

"The whole city would have heard that," said Ironwood. "It must have been going on while we were looking for a band to join. What's this palace gossip?"

"The lord's got a problem," Shellring said, preening with this inside information. "He has to appoint investigators, and he can't trust anybody. His constables are good enough to find a pot of ale within arm's reach, but that's about all. The other members of the Great Council are likely to do something underhanded just to topple him."

"What about the other officials?" Nistur asked. "The judges? Surely there must be efficient persons within the

government, else the city would collapse."

"Every one of them got his job through patronage," Shellring said. "They're all in the pocket of one councilor or another."

"This bears pondering," Nistur said, stroking his beard.

"How is that?" asked Ironwood. "It's a palace matter, and we're here in the dungeon."

"Just a passing thought. Shellring, does this grapevine of yours work both ways? Can you transmit a report through the guards and servants and so forth all the way to the palace?"

She thought about it. "I never tried, but I guess it could be done. The problem is, humble folk are always eager to hear what the great ones are doing. The rich never care what happens to the rest of us."

"That presents a difficulty," said Nistur, "but it should not prove to be insurmountable. There must be reward involved. If, each step along the chain of information transmission, each person were to be promised a consideration, our message should reach the lord's ear in short order."

"Message?" Ironwood said. "What are you thinking?"

"I am trying to think of a way out of our predicament. A predicament, I might add, to which your unconsidered actions brought us."

"You needn't remind me. What's your scheme?"

"A moment. Inspiration comes from the gods, and they are sometimes slow." The others waited patiently while the ex-assassin cogitated, then said, "It strikes me that we may be the answer to the very problem that so vexes the Lord of Tarsis. Suppose he were to learn that, repining in his own dungeon, were two men whose specialty is the detection and apprehension of malefactors? Might he not wish to secure the services of such men?"

"He might," said Ironwood, looking around him, "but where are they?"

"I know you are only pretending to be dense," said Nistur. "I rejoice to learn that you actually possess a sense of humor."

We must devise for ourselves a sufficiently illustrious and successful past, in some land safely distant from Tarsis."

"It might work," Ironwood allowed. "If he gets word, he'll have us hauled out for an interview. Do you think he'll believe us?"

"You overlook a crucial factor. He will want to believe us. By now he must be desperate for a solution to his problem. This should cause him to overlook questions that at another time would be more than obvious."

"It's worth a try," Ironwood said. "At least it would get us out of this place, and we could work out a plan of escape once we're free."

"I don't know..." Shellring said. "Getting word to the palace won't be all that hard. But getting it from there to the lord's ear may be."

"Even in the loftiest places," Nistur said, "there are certain servants who have the ear of the highest persons: the aged nurse, the indispensable valet, the steward or majordomo ..."

"The cupbearer!" Ironwood said. "Kings and great lords go in constant fear of poison. The cupbearer would have to be a trusted man."

"Excellent!" Nistur commended. "You see, my friend, you are getting good at this detection business already."

Shellring looked from one to the other suspiciously. "This is all well enough for you two, but what about me? What do I get out of this?"

"Rest assured," said Nistur, "that when we have our freedom, we will secure yours. Now, my young companion, this is what you must transmit through the prison grapevine." And so they conferred for the better part of an hour. Then Shellring rose, went to the gate, and began to rattle the bars.

* * * * *

The Lord of Tarsis realized, with a start, that he was biting his nails, something he had not done in years. The sands were trickling inexorably through the great glass, and he was no closer to a solution for his vexing problem. All

through the night he had interviewed petty officials and found none who combined the traits of intelligence and trustworthiness. Also, the brighter ones seemed scatterbrained. The combination of intelligence with a shrewd, analytical mind was rarer than he had expected.

"My lord?"

He looked up to see his cupbearer standing by his side.

"What is it?"

"You need something to sustain you, my lord. You've not slept or eaten since the barbarian chief arrived. You must not neglect yourself so, my lord. I've had the cook make something for you, and I put together something for you to drink." The old man held a tray of sausages and cakes dusted with seeds surrounding a large cup of heated wine from which came herb-scented steam.

"You are probably right." He took the cup and a seedcake and began to alternate bites with sips.

"You know, my lord, I've just heard the most remarkable thing. It's something that may help you to deal with the savages."

"Eh?" said the lord hopefully. "You've heard something? Is there a witness? Someone who saw the crime and wants to speak?"

"No, my lord, not that. But you have, in the jail beneath the Hall of Justice, two men, foreigners, who are famed in several lands for ferreting out murderers and plotters, and criminals of all sorts."

"Ridiculous! I was down there just yesterday morning, questioning the people who found the nomad's body. I saw no such foreigners then."

"I hear that these two were arrested only yesterday afternoon, for disturbing the peace."

"Then send for Constable Weite at once."

The cupbearer bowed his way out, and the Lord of Tarsis turned over the possibilities in his mind. This, if true, might be just the solution he needed: trained and experienced

investigators, from a foreign land and therefore not the hirelings of his rivals. Yes, this could be just what he was seeking. He did not spare a thought for how his cupbearer came by such remarkable information. He demanded that his servants be competent at their work and loyal to him. Beyond that, he had not the slightest interest in how they thought or what they did. At most times, he was scarcely aware of their presence.

Minutes later, Constable Weite appeared. "My lord?"

"There are two foreigners in the Hall of Justice lockup. They were arrested yesterday afternoon for disturbing the peace and are said to be able investigators of crime. Bring them to me."

Weite blinked. "My lord? I have heard of no such men."

"A Lord of Tarsis has sources of information unavailable to a mere constable. Go and do my bidding."

"Yes, my lord!" He saluted, snapped his heels together, and was off.

An hour later, Constable Weite returned. He had in tow, flanked by guards and draped in chains, a pair of raffish-looking prisoners. One was a big, tough-appearing specimen dressed in remarkable armor. The other looked as if he might have been a merchant or a scholar, except that he had managed to maintain through incarceration a fastidiousness, almost a fussiness, about his clothing and general appearance. In the rear of the little procession was a guard who carried an armload of weapons and personal effects, doubtless confiscated from the felons upon arrest.

"Here are the foreigners, my lord," Constable Weite reported unnecessarily

"Detective Nistur, my lord, at your service," said the shorter man, doffing his feathered hat and contriving a graceful bow despite the cuffs, manacles, and leg irons he wore.

"Detective Ironwood, my lord," said the other, knuckling his brow in a perfunctory salute.

"Constable Weite," said the lord, "you and the others may

withdraw. And all this ironmongery will not be necessary."

"These are dangerous criminals, my lord!" Weite protested.

"Just unchain them and carry their weapons outside the chamber. I should be safe enough with you in close call."

"As you wish, my lord," the constable replied doubtfully. Then, to the others, he said, "Unshackle them. And you two, don't try anything. I'll be just outside, mind you."

"Under such a threat," said Nistur, "who would dare?"

Amid much rattling of keys, the chains fell away and the guards withdrew, Weite casting a lingering, suspicious gaze on the two prisoners as he went out.

"I have little time, so do not waste it," said the Lord of Tarsis.

"Word has reached me that you two are skilled criminal investigators. Is this true?"

"It is more than true," said Nistur, curling one end of his mustache. "In certain places, we are quite famous. Why, two years ago, in the great city of Thansut, it was the team of Nistur and Ironwood that exposed the murderous conspiracy of the Temple of the Frog God."

"Thansut?" said the lord. "I have never heard of the place."

"It is rather far from here. But you have certainly heard of Palanthas?"

"Of course I have."

"Well, a mere half year ago, it was we who discovered the murderer of Jesamyn, chief of the prestigious Mortar-Mixers Guild, and brought him to justice. You need but send there to your fellow sovereign for confirmation. He will recommend us most highly."

"It would take weeks to get an answer back from Palanthas, and I do not have weeks."

"What a pity," Nistur said. "Upon my honor as a gentleman, my lord, my colleague and I are unmatched at the art of criminal detection. You have but to give us your commission, and we promise to render complete satisfaction."

The lord studied them for long moments; then he came to a decision. "I will chance it. Your first commission is likely to be

your last, however. You now have a bit over four days to uncover the murderer. After that, the nomad army will destr—will besiege the city. Here is what I require of you." He gave them a terse synopsis of the negotiations with the envoys, the discovery of the murdered ambassador, and the demands of Kyaga Strongbow.

"I quite understand," said Nistur when he was finished. "We shall place the malefactor, or malefactors, securely in your grasp, alive, within four days."

"You had better." He glanced at Ironwood, then looked back at Nistur suspiciously. "I notice that you do all the talking."

"I," said Nistur, "am the intellectual portion of this • partnership. My companion provides the combative expertise so often necessary in our line of work."

"Well, anyone can see you're no sort of fighting man." The lord opened a wooden chest and drew forth a pair of silver amulets, like oversized coins, bearing his personal sigil. Each hung on a narrow, silver chain. "This is my seal. Wearing it, you can go anywhere and question anyone, including the nomad camp and its inhabitants."

"We shall need three, my lord," said Nistur.

"Three?"

"We need a guide, since this is not our city. In the Hall of Justice we met a young woman named Shellring. She seems most knowledgeable about all parts of the city. If you could release her to our custody, we will stand surety for her good behavior."

"Constable Weite!"

The official came in. "My lord?"

"In the dungeon you have a woman named Shellring?"

"Yes, my lord. She is one of our regulars."

"Bring her here."

"Immediately, my lord." Constable Weite looked as if he no longer had the capacity to be surprised. He clumped away, and Nistur spoke.

"And now, my lord, there remains one small matter."

"I cannot imagine what it might be. You have your commission, and every second you spend here is a second wasted."

"Why, sir, there is the matter of our recompense."

"Recompense? You mean pay?"

"My lord is most astute."

"You two do enjoy breathing, do you not?"

"I can scarcely imagine life without that essential exercise," Nistur answered.

"Just so. Well, serve me well and I will allow you to continue breathing. Fail me and you will hang. That should be recompense enough. Or perhaps I will turn you over to Kyaga Strongbow. He is far too uncivilized for a simple hanging."

"As you will, my lord," said Nistur, ruefully. "However, we must have some small operating funds. Much of our work will involve passing petty bribes to servants and persons of low degree for helpful bits of information."

"Very well. My palace accountant will supply you with funds, for" which you will render a strict accounting."

"As my lord wishes," Nistur agreed.

"Then go and do my bidding."

The two bowed their way out. In the hall outside the lord's chamber they retrieved their weapons and draped the silver seals around their necks while the guards eyed them dubiously.

"You there," Nistur said to a guard. "Lead us to the palace accountant."

"Who are you to give me orders?" sneered the guard.

Ironwood thrust his seal in the man's face. "We are the special investigators appointed by the Lord of Tarsis, fool! Hinder us at your peril!"

The man's eyes went wide. "Yes, sir! Sorry, sir. Come this way."

Shellring rejoined them before the gates of the palace. "You pulled it off!" she said, grinning.

Nistur hung the third seal around her neck. "You are now a special investigator for the Lord of Tarsis. With this, you can question the chief of the nomads himself."

"Why would I want to do that?" She hefted the silver seal in her palm. "I wonder how much I can get for this?"

"Until we formulate a plan, you will keep it with you at all times," Nistur cautioned.

"Let's plan over a decent meal," Ironwood said. "I'm starving!"

"A good meal and a bath sound like an excellent idea," Nistur said. "Shellring, lead us to a decent establishment. I think we can dip into our operating funds to that extent."

As she led them across the broad plaza, Ironwood grumbled.

"This Lord of Tarsis is nothing but a jumped-up merchant or banker. You can tell by the way he pinches coins until his fingertips are stained with copper. A

real prince would have paid us with a lavish hand, not weaseled like a market-hawker."

"Alas, this is not a princely city," Nistur sighed. "The citizenry lacks even a proper appreciation of poetry."

Shellring led them to a prosperous tavern called the Three Dragons. Above its spacious portal was hung a sculpture of the great winged beasts, wrought in bronze. Within, its appointments were as lavish as its sign, letting all and sundry know that this was an establishment that catered to a prosperous clientele. At their entry, an aproned man hurried to them, his smile of greeting turning to a look of puzzlement when he caught sight of Shellring.

"May I help you, sirs?" he said.

"Mine host," said Nistur, "you may conduct us to a booth and bring us your best ale and whatever food you have prepared, so long as it be in sufficient quantity. When we have dined, we shall require the use of your bathing facilities." At the man's doubtful expression he held up his seal. "We are the special investigators of the Lord of Tarsis."

Immediately, the man's expression changed. "Certainly, sir!

Come right this way! Nothing is too good for my lord's officials!"

They were conducted to a spacious booth, and, with a speed that was near-magical, servers set pots of ale and great, steaming platters of food before them.

"These official seals are wonderful things," Nistur remarked. Then they said little as they fortified themselves against the rigors sure to come.

Nistur burped discreetly as the platters were cleared away and sweet pastries were set before them. When the servers were safely out of earshot he spoke.

"Now, my friends, we must make plans. The city is closed up tight and guarded by the nomads. Escape will not be easy."

"But our seals will get us through the gates," Ironwood pointed out.

"Only to be among the savages, who will watch us with even greater vigilance than the bungling city militia. That will be no improvement."

"I'll have to inspect the city walls," Ironwood said. "The nomads may not be numerous enough for a complete encirclement. If I spot a hole in their lines, we can be out through it after dark. They'll have roving patrols out, but I'll take my chances with them."

"That's good enough for you two," Shellring said sullenly, "but I've never been away from the city in my life."

"You may have little choice," Ironwood said. "The nomads may destroy the place soon, and you'll have no city. Why not throw in with us? It'll be an interesting life, even if it's a short one."

"I've thought of traveling," she said wistfully, "but cutpurses are unpopular everywhere."

"My friends," said Nistur, "it occurs to me that there is another course we may take."

"What's that?" Ironwood inquired.

"We may actually find out who killed the ambassador."

Ironwood looked at him in astonishment. "But we're not

investigators! That's just a story we made up."

"How do we know?" Nistur pointed out. "We've never tried. We are all, if I may say so, brave, resourceful, adaptable persons, shrewd of mind and gracious of address. We may be just the stuff of which successful investigators are made!" Almost without his notice, eagerness and enthusiasm had crept into his voice.

"I don't know ..." Ironwood began hesitantly.

"Listen," Shellring said, "we can't just be scouting out a way to escape. Pretty soon everybody in Tarsis will know who we are. They'll be watching every move we make, and some of them will be reporting back to the lord.

We have to look busy doing something, so it might as well be investigating the murder. Remember, we have a little more than four days. That should be time enough to work out our next move."

"There," said Nistur, "you see? Even this humble young lady sees the wisdom of my plan."

"All right," said Ironwood grudgingly. "Investigators we are. But where do we start?"

"Our partner looks pensive," said Nistur. "What are your thoughts?"

"Well," Shellring said, "I'm thinking about those poor fools who were in jail with us. They didn't do anything to deserve being shut up there. I always earned my way into that place, but they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Now they've been questioned, the lord will probably forget about them, and who knows when someone will think to turn them loose? Do you think we can do anything for them?"

"Excellent thought!" said Nistur. "What's more natural than we should ourselves question these witnesses? To the jail, then. But first, a bath!"

"My good man," Nistur said to the head guard, "we have completed our interrogation of these prisoners and are satisfied that they know nothing of use. You may set them at

liberty."

The jailer looked at the three doubtfully. "No such order has come down from the palace."

Nistur stroked his seal complacently. "As you know, we are special investigators in the matter of the murder of Ambassador Yalmuk. In this capacity, we have authority over all phases and persons involved in this investigation. We have powers to arrest or free any suspects or witnesses we please. Free them. Unless, of course, you wish to disturb His Lordship at this crucial time in order to obtain clarification."

"Well... I suppose it's in order, as long as you take full responsibility."

"The fullest," Nistur confirmed. When the jailer was gone below, he turned to his friends. "The wonderful thing about having such a unique office is that we get to make up our powers as we require them."

"Until someone seriously challenges us," Ironwood said.

"Then we've not got a leg to stand on."

Outside the Hall of Justice, the ragged little band of prisoners thanked their benefactors.

"You may not be in much better condition now," Iron-wood cautioned. "Kyaga isn't allowing anyone to leave the city."

"Anything has to be better than that jail," said a traveling merchant. "If the nomads storm in, we can at least hope to find an escape route."

"Which statue is the one where you found the body?" Nistur asked.

"I'll show you." The merchant led them across the small plaza to the statue of Abushmulum the Ninth. As the former prisoners made their hasty exit, lest the authorities change their minds, the investigators studied the base of the statue. No one had yet bothered to wash down the base and the paving below. The stream of blood was still plain, as was the blackened puddle that spread across the flagstones.

"I wonder why whoever killed him heaved the corpse up there," Ironwood mused.

"Boost me up," Nistur said. "I want to examine this pedestal."

Ironwood gave him a leg up, and Shellring followed with the agility of a monkey.

"What do you see?" Ironwood asked.

"About what you'd expect," Shellring said. "There's a lot of blood up here. Old Abushmulum looks like he's been wading in it."

"I find that very curious," Nistur observed.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because there is so much blood up here, whereas below there is only the puddle, which clearly trickled down there from here."

"You mean he wasn't killed down here and thrown up there?" Ironwood demanded. "He was killed on the pedestal?"

"So it would appear." With some difficulty, Nistur scrambled off the pedestal. Shellring sprang lightly and landed easily on her feet.

"But what was he doing up there?" Ironwood asked. "He must have climbed onto the pedestal with the murderer and got killed. It makes no sense."

"Little of this will make sense until we have all the facts," said Nistur.

"You talk as if you know all about this kind of business," said Ironwood.

"I am learning, and so are you. Come along." The ex-assassin poet began walking northward.

"Where are we going?" Shellring asked.

"Constable Weite said the body was taken to the palace mortuary. With luck, it may still be there."

"I don't see the point of looking at a dead barbarian," she muttered, but followed along anyway.

The palace mortuary was located in a wing far from the great rooms of state and the living quarters of the Lord of Tarsis. It was a place where the bodies of prominent persons were prepared for state funerals. At the entrance they explained

their mission to the shaven-headed, lugubrious individual in charge.

"You are just in time," he said solemnly. "The departed was just about to be taken to the nomad camp for their funeral rites. Come with me."

They found Yalmuk Bloodarrow lying on a catafalque covered with costly silks. His clothing had been washed and his body bathed and anointed. His hands lay crossed on his chest, resting on the hilt of his curved sword. The fatal wound had been tastefully covered by a silken scarf, and even his features had been rearranged in a peaceful expression.

"Good job," Ironwood commended. "He almost looks happy to be dead."

"We always strive to do our best for our clients," said the state undertaker.

Delicately, Nistur lifted the scarf away from the late ambassador's neck. Both men examined the ghastly wound with interest. Shellring turned away, her face slightly pale.

"Surely you have seen your share of murder victims in your short life, have you not?" Nistur murmured.

"More than enough," she said. "But I never get used to it. I'm a thief, not a killer."

"This is an odd-looking wound," Ironwood said. "But I can't say just why."

"I understand what you mean," Nistur concurred. "There is no raggedness to the cut, but then a very keen blade will not leave ragged edges. Rather, it is usually plain where a cut begins and where it terminates. There will be some, some"—he waved a hand in search of a fitting word—"some disproportion to the wound: a wider incision where the cut begins, or a shallower cut where the blade was lifted away. Here we have a nearly circular cut that seems to be of equal depth all the way around."

"I think you two enjoy this," Shellring muttered.

"Exercise of the intellectual faculties is always

enjoyable," Nistur said. Then, to the undertaker: "I must turn him so we can examine the back of his neck."

"Must you?" the bald man said, shocked.

"I assure you it will not disturb him in the least."

Scandalized, the man summoned a pair of attendants whose expressions were as glum as his own. Carefully, the two raised the corpse until it was in a near-sitting posture. Nistur and Ironwood leaned close to examine the nape of the neck.

"Aha!" said Nistur. "Observe, my friends. Here we have a continuation of the circular incision clear around the back of the neck and bone-deep, but do you notice a difference?"

Determined not to seem squeamish before her companions, Shellring squinted at the wound while trying to keep her lunch down. "Looks like two cuts," she said. "One right above the other."

"Exactly!" Nistur crowed.

"So what does it mean?" Ironwood asked. "I've never seen a wound like it."

"I have," Nistur said. "In my, as it were, former profession, I learned of the properties of a great many weapons. This wound was not made by a blade at all. It was made by a garrote consisting of two handles connected by a very strong, thin steel wire. The wire encircles the neck, and the handles are pulled in opposite directions to tighten the noose. The double cut is where the wires overlapped behind the neck." At his gesture the attendants lowered the body and efficiently restored it to its lying-in-state condition.

"Come, my friends," said Nistur. "We have much to do."

Outside the mortuary, Shellring breathed easier. "I don't like that place! Where I live may not be a mansion, but at least most of the people there are alive!"

"Where do you live when you're not at Stunbog's or taking the lord's hospitality in jail?" Ironwood asked her.

She shrugged her bony shoulders. "Here and there. Mostly, I stay in the Old City."

"I thought it was abandoned," Nistur said.

"The officials say it's abandoned because there aren't any households or businesses there. That means no taxes get collected there, which means, as far as they're concerned, it doesn't exist. But people live there who can't find anyplace else. If you need a place to sleep, you can usually find a nook in some cellar to hole up where you'll be pretty safe and not too cold."

"What is the nature of the danger?" Nistur asked.

"The gangs, mostly. They hunt down thieves like me, looking for money hoards. If they catch you, they'll torture you to make you reveal your stash. After that, it can get really rough. There are plenty of killers there, some of them insane."

"Well," said Nistur, "now you need have no such fears. You are an official."

"It's my life," she said belligerently. "I don't want to trade it for another."

"Let's keep our minds on our problem," Ironwood said. "It was bad luck that the body was cleaned up, even his clothes washed."

"He was none too pleasant a corpse as it was," said Nistur, "but I take your meaning. Doubtless evidence was destroyed that might have pointed toward the killer."

"So who do we talk to next?" Shelling asked.

"Certain high nobles had power games to play with the late ambassador, together with rivalries directed toward the lord. I think these are the strongest suspects, but I have a certain, small misgiving that makes me reluctant to question them at random."

"What's that?" Ironwood asked.

"I think one of them almost certainly hired me to kill you, and we know that this man is ill-disposed and inclined to hire killings. Also, he is certain to feel cheated and resentful."

"Hmm, that could be a problem," Ironwood admitted.

"And yet I must locate him," Nistur said.

"Why?" Shellring asked. "Do you think he might've murdered the ambassador?"

"I have no idea. But I must return his payment. I did not earn it."

Ironwood pondered for a while. "In my travels," he said at length, "I came across only one people who regularly employ the garotte. These are certain desert barbarians, outlaws for the most part, who use them to strangle unsuspecting victims. For this purpose, they usually employ bowstrings or knotted, hide thongs, but steel wire would answer the same purpose even better. I'll warrant there are a good many such rogues in that army outside the walls."

"That is a shrewd deduction," Nistur commended. "You see, already you justify the lord's trust in you."

"But why haul the body all the way up to the pedestal?" Shellring asked.

"I have been pondering that very same question," Nistur said. "And I think I have the answer. Come with me."

They followed him back to the little plaza before the Hall of Justice. Again Ironwood boosted him atop the pedestal.

"Observe," Nistur said. He took a silken scarf from his neck and, gripping a corner in each hand, twirled it into the semblance of a thin cord. "Here we have our killer's weapon." Now he squatted on his heels, the soles of his feet flat on the stone, his toes almost at the edge of the pedestal. His hands were now just below that edge, crossed at the wrists, the scarf forming an elongated U.

"As his victim passes below, the murderer drops the noose over his head, pulling it thus"—he uncrossed his wrists—"tightening the loop. Then he merely straightens his legs." Nistur stood to his full height, slowly, as if lifting a ponderous weight. "You see, the muscles of the thighs are the strongest in the body, far stronger than those of arms and back, which must be employed in gar-roting someone from behind, at ground level. Thus even a man of middling strength can both kill and lift a victim from the ground. The

victim's own weight does most of the work, forcing the cord or, as in this case, wire, into the neck. The murderer simply steps backward, lets the victim fall, and watches him die at leisure. It is an ideal way for one to overcome another who is physically much stronger, so we need not necessarily be seeking one more powerful than the burly Yalmuk."

"Effective and efficient, if you can just lure your victim near enough," Ironwood admitted.

"It is even better than that," Nistur said.

"How so?" Ironwood inquired.

"It is far more dramatic than an ordinary killing. It leaves the viewer shaken and bewildered at the same time." Nistur beamed down at them. "This tells us something else of vital interest: our killer has a sense of style."

Chapter Six

"It strikes me," Nistur said, "that we need an operating base."

The mismatched trio stood on a gracefully arched bridge that spanned what had once been a picturesque canal, part of a system that had connected all parts of the city with its harbor, allowing cargo to be off-loaded from the ships and transported easily to the shops, homes, markets, and warehouses of Tarsis. Now the canals were dry, slowly filling with dust, leaves, trash, and rubble that the occasional heavy rains failed to wash away. A few old houseboats rested on the bottoms, some of them still inhabited.

"With these"—Ironwood tapped his seal—"we can commandeer an office in the palace if we like, and lodging at any house or inn we want. I can't say that I like the idea, though."

"Exactly," Nistur concurred. "Our prime suspects are the most important people of this city. Face it, my friends, we now have vaunting titles and supposed powers, but we have no protection save our own skill at arms. I think myself a match for most swordsmen with my blade, and I know that you, Ironwood, are a superb fighter, and Shelling here is

adept at escape and evasion, but we must be realistic. We are no match for a lord who can send twenty armed men after us. The city is where we are in the greatest danger, especially after dark. I doubt anyone will try to assault us in daylight, where witnesses may report."

"We could take one of the towers in the city wall," Iron-wood suggested. "There we'd be secure."

"Spoken like a soldier," said Nistur. "But it would be uncomfortable, inconvenient, and all too public, with the walls thronged with mercenaries and drafted citizens. No, I would prefer a place where we can come and go unseen. Our duties may call for clandestine activity."

"I know plenty of good hiding places in the Old City," Shelling said, "but I wouldn't call any of them comfortable." After a pause, she said, "Why don't we stay right where we've been? Stunbog's hulk is secure, and the harbor dwellers think a lot of him. They have their own ways of passing signals. We'd get plenty of warning if outsiders came down to the harbor looking for us."

"Not a bad idea," Ironwood said. "And now we can pay him for his trouble."

Nistur nodded. "He protests that he is not a wizard, but I don't doubt that he can whip up a few protective spells, and I would estimate that Myrsa is a match for any three or four of the mercenaries and thugs who inhabit this city in such distressing numbers."

"Stunbog's it is, then," Ironwood said, "if he'll agree to it. Besides, I'm not so sure about our employer."

"You think the lord himself might have done away with the ambassador?" Nistur inquired.

"Just now, nobody is above suspicion," Ironwood said. "In the past I've usually been content to serve a paymaster, so long as it wasn't some robber baron. But most small wars are pretty straightforward affairs. Two or more lords have a disagreement over who owns what land, or who deserves to

inherit a particular title, and they agree to fight it out. In this wretched city it's all

different: secret factions playing their own power games, people professing loyalty to one side while selling it out. I wouldn't doubt that half the nobles in this city are dealing secretly with Kyaga, each trying to find some advantage for himself."

"Alas, all too true," said Nistur. "So we trust no one except one another." He clapped Shellring on the shoulder. "My young companion, I have a special task for you."

Her eyes narrowed. "What is it?" she asked suspiciously.

"Oh, don't worry, you'll find this agreeable. You are intimate with the underworld of this city. You know the rogues, the beggars, the thieves and fences. These are persons who must be quite reluctant to speak to official investigators. In fact, they will run at our approach. But they might well confide in one of their own. I want you to circulate among your lowly friends today. See if any of them saw anything untoward the night of the murder, or overheard some bit of conversation that might be pertinent. Be prepared to pay for information." He took some coins from his purse and gave them to her. "Are you armed?"

She shook her head. "I had a knife, but the jail guards took it and didn't give it back."

"Then buy one and keep it handy. Report to us at Stunbog's tonight."

"I'll be there," she promised. Then she tucked her seal and its chain beneath her tunic. "Better keep this out of sight. The lord's insignia kind of makes people nervous in my part of the city, and people will kill you for a lot less silver than this."

"It probably isn't silver anyway," Ironwood grouched, "just silver-gilt copper."

"Believe me," she assured them, "I know people who'd kill me for that much copper. See you tonight." She left the bridge and faded from sight like a shadow.

"I thought I'd lived in some tough places," Ironwood mused. "I don't know how that girl has managed to live as long as she has in this rat warren."

"One does what one must to survive," Nistur said. "Come along, my friend. We have a few hours of daylight left. I do not want to question anyone before I have a sound idea of our milieu. Let's explore the city a bit and get a feel for the place."

"Makes sense," said Ironwood. "And I want to inspect the walls and get a look at the nomad camp. But just when did you take over this operation? You talk as if you were my superior officer. Let me remind you that it's my geas stamped on your chin."

"Of that I am all too aware," Nistur said, absentmindedly rubbing the spot, which still tingled a bit. "However, I think you will agree that my tongue is rather more glib than your own. It is the poet in me. And this sort of mental exercise appeals to me. What say you to this proposal: you back my lead in these matters of detection, and I will follow your leadership should we become involved in a war? I am quite ready to defer to your superior military expertise."

"All right for now," Ironwood said grudgingly.

They left the bridge and began to walk northward, past a high wall that surrounded the extensive palace grounds in the central city, on the side opposite the great plaza.

"And now, my friend," Nistur said, "perhaps it is time you told me why a lord of this city has reason to purchase your life. At first I did not inquire because it was a professional matter and, truly, none of my business. But now we are involved with these disagreeable people, and I must be aware of all the facts pertinent to our security."

"Believe me," Ironwood said, "if I knew, I would tell you. I've no wish to place us in any greater danger than we are in already. The fact is, I have no idea why some local aristocrat wants me dead. I've been in the city less than a month, spending the pay from my last war and

looking for a new one. I've associated with nobody except my fellow mercenaries and such people as frequent the taverns on the old waterfront. Of course, I don't always remember ..." His voice trailed off in embarrassment.

"You mean, your recurring condition involves more than paralysis of the limbs? Are lapses of memory sometimes involved?"

"Sometimes. But not lately." The mercenary shook his head as if to clear it. "No. I am certain that I've never had dealings with any lord of this city."

"Ah, well. Aristocrats are a whimsical, unpredictable lot at the best of times. Perhaps he was slumming, in disguise, and you beat him at dice. Or possibly he was out strolling with his wife, and she cast a glance at you he thought perhaps too lingering."

"It could be," Ironwood allowed. "Or maybe he mistook me for somebody else. We'll probably find out all too soon. Let's just try our best to survive the experience."

Near the northeast corner of the palace grounds they came to a broad boulevard that ran eastward to one of the city's three largest gates, and they turned their steps gateward. As they walked, Nistur was struck by the sharp contrast between the two sides of the boulevard. To the south was a relatively prosperous district of imposing homes and expensive shops. To the north was the Old— or Upper—City, which was, as Shelling had explained, considered abandoned by the authorities. Most of its taller structures had collapsed in the Cataclysm, and the few that still stood above three stories were shells only, with daylight showing through their gaping windows, all of the roofs having long since disintegrated. It was apparent that the Cataclysm had struck here much like an ordinary earthquake, which meant it had been followed by devastating fires. All the standing structures showed fire

damage, and there were no remaining wooden buildings at all.

"To judge by the height of the ruins," Nistur observed, "that must have been by far the wealthiest part of the city. It is little wonder Tarsis never fully recovered."

"They've just no spirit," Ironwood said unsympathetically. "I've seen cities leveled to the ground by the Cataclysm, and they've rebuilt so you'd think they were never damaged. These people have no steel in their spines."

"I cannot say I like them much, but we must be fair. The city was based on its harbor, and the Cataclysm destroyed it."

"Why do we have to be fair?" Ironwood asked.

They came to the East Gate, a structure consisting of two massive wooden doors each ten feet wide and twenty feet high, backed by the heavy iron grid of a portcullis. Ordinarily the portcullis would be raised at this hour, only its fanglike lower portion showing overhead, but now it was in place for the duration of the emergency. To one side of the main gate was a small, heavily fortified door that allowed access by foot when the main gate was closed. This postern was now closed as well, and barred by several thick beams.

The gate was flanked by a pair of towers that rose fifteen feet above the wall proper, their tops crowned with crenellations and armed with heavy ballistae; crossbows three or four times the size of the man-carried weapon were mounted on swivels and capable of firing steel bolts or stones the size of melons. A number of newly hired mercenaries leaned on their spears, glaives, halberds, and other assorted polearms around the bases of the twin towers, studying the odd pair as they approached.

"Who's captain of the gate?" Ironwood demanded. "Who's asking?" said a soldier who leaned on a longbow instead of a polearm. Nistur and Ironwood held up their seals, and the insignia worked its usual magic.

"Captain Karst, at your service," said the gray-mustached individual who bustled from the base of one of the towers. Then he squinted at the mercenary in the dragon armor. "Ironwood? You were turned down by every recruiter in the

city! How did you get a cushy position with the Lord of Tarsis?"

"Some of us were meant for higher things, Captain," Nistur announced grandly. "We must inspect the walls and survey the nomad camp."

The captain's heavy shoulders shrugged, making his steel and leather harness creak. "Whatever you like. Come along." He led them into one of the towers and they ascended the spiral, turnpike stairway. "We were told there'd be officials with those seals, and we were to let them pass through the gates. Are you really looking into the killing of that barbarian envoy?"

"That's the job," Ironwood affirmed.

Atop the tower, the mercenaries and city guards came to ragged attention when their captain appeared. The sergeant in charge saluted. "All quiet out in the nomad camp, sir," he reported. "Looks like another band arrived about an hour ago. Maybe a hundred of them."

Nistur and Ironwood went to the parapet and peered out through the crenels. "An imposing sight," Nistur said.

The nomad camp sprawled in all directions. There were hundreds of tents, pens of animals, mounted men practicing archery or lance-play at impromptu ranges, roving patrols riding out or returning to camp, all of it lacking the order of a civilized army but having the unmistakable stamp of an encampment of warriors who knew their business.

"Nomads travel by whole tribes," Ironwood said. "What proportion out there are warriors?"

"They're all fighters," Karst reported. "This new high chief made them leave their families out in their ancestral ranges. That camp is a third again as big as it was this time yesterday." The captain's teeth bared in a mirthless grin. "I'll wager word has spread that Kyaga intends to sack Tarsis. They all want to be in on the looting, even the ones who haven't yet sworn allegiance to him."

"He'll have their allegiance if he succeeds," Ironwood said.

"He'll be leader of all the nomads and no question about it."

"You mean," Nistur said, "you think it is not in his best interest that we should find who killed the ambassador, thus robbing him of his excuse to attack?"

"He'd gain nothing by it at all," Karst said. "Far from it. He'd disappoint all those warriors out there."

"There is not much point to our commission then, is there?" Nistur said.

"That villain out there," Karst said, pointing to the huge tent in the center of the camp, "is supposed to have come here for negotiations with the lord and the councilors. He said he'll attack if the killers aren't delivered up in five days. If he gets them, it's back to negotiations. If the negotiations break down, he attacks anyway." He shrugged again. "It's all the same to me. I collect my pay whatever happens."

"What shape are the defenses in?" Ironwood asked.

"Better than they were two days ago," Karst answered.

"We've had every carpenter and blacksmith in the city repairing the catapults and ballistae. They're mostly in working order now. The stonemasons have been fixing the breaches in the city walls, which weren't as bad as we feared at first."

"Are there enough men to defend walls this long?" Ironwood asked.

"No, but then I haven't seen those nomads building any siege engines, either. I doubt they know how to make or use them. If not attacked by engines, even weakly defended walls can hold for a long, long time."

"That's true," Ironwood said grimly. Nistur glanced at him, surprised at his tone, but he did not comment on it.

"Then they have little hope of storming the walls?" the former assassin asked.

"It's something every soldier knows," Karst told him. "You can't take a heavily fortified position with missile weapons alone. They can be decisive in the open field, especially when coupled with mobility. But shoot up at walls like this,

and the defenders just crouch behind the merlons until the storm is past. You can even stand in the crenels to shoot back and be protected by the mantlets." He indicated the big, rectangular wooden shields that had been hoisted into place between the merlons, slanting outward like the eaves of a roof.

"I see," Nistur said.

"And," Karst went on, warming to his subject, "when you are fighting a battle in the open field, you must have trained soldiers, disciplined and responsive to orders. They must be strong, brave, and fit. You can't give some ham-handed farm boy a sword and expect him to use it effectively. It takes a powerful man to pull a longbow, and he must have years of practice to strike a distant target accurately.

"But when you are defending a city like this, townsmen can be of aid. Any weakling can crank up a crossbow and, by shooting into a massed enemy, the bolt is likely to do some damage." Karst stooped and picked up a stone from a pile below the nearest crenel. Every crenel was so provided. He tossed the stone to Nistur, who caught it adroitly. It was a smooth, rounded cobble, a bit larger than a man's fist, such as were employed to pave the city streets.

"It would take a strong arm and a good eye to bring down a warrior with such a stone, would it not?"

Nistur tossed it up and caught it again in his palm. "I would not care to try it."

"But from a wall like the one that surrounds Tarsis, fifty or sixty feet high at most spots, a doddering old merchant can toss one over the parapet, and by the time it reaches the ground, it will be traveling with enough force to kill a man." He leaned out over the parapet and looked down. "Take a look down there."

Nistur imitated him and peered down the face of the wall. It was vertical for most of its height, but it flared sharply outward near the base.

"That slope gives the base of the wall extra strength," Karst

explained. "It makes it harder to use a ram or a mole against it. But it also makes for a fine glancing-surface. Drop one of these rocks like this—" He dropped one, and it fell precipitately, gaining speed with each foot it dropped. Then it struck the slanted surface and bounced outward almost horizontally. "You see? Pick your spot right, and the stone will catch a man right in the face, if his helmet doesn't have a strong visor, and few of these nomads wear any armor to speak of."

"You know your profession well, Captain," Nistur commended. "What about assault ladders? I can see that the walls are high at this spot, but there are many low, ruinous places where the enemy might try to scale them."

"No one has seen them building any. I doubt the nomads have the stomach for such work anyway. It is a desperate gamble, trying to take a wall with ladders. The attackers always take terrible losses before they can seize control."

"Aye," said Ironwood. "Great lords usually employ their peasant levies to carry the ladders and make the first assault, for they think such men useless and expendable."

"And so they are," Karst said. "No sense letting trained soldiers be killed before they even have a chance to fight. You send in the serfs with the ladders while the warriors man the siege towers. In the towers, they're safe until the enemy gets atop the wall. And those nomads aren't building any towers or rounding up peasants from the countryside."

"So," Nistur asked, "just what is going on here? Is a real war in the offing, or is this all just a great deal of posturing before the Lord of Tarsis and Kyaga Strongbow settle their differences diplomatically?"

"There I cannot help you," Karst admitted. "I have never worked for a place like Tarsis before, and there hasn't been a high chief of the nomads in my lifetime."

"Might it mean," Nistur hazarded, "that they intend war, but neither side knows how to wage war properly?"

"You had better hope not," said Karst, now sounding as grim

as Ironwood.

"How so?" Nistur asked, suspecting already what the answer must be.

"Because," Karst said, "when utter fools make war on one another, the slaughter on both sides is unbelievable."

"Who is in charge of this gate?" Ironwood asked.

"I am," Karst said.

"I mean, which noble of Tarsis? Surely, each of them has a section of wall where they may preen and strut in their military finery, pretending to be soldiers."

"Oh, them. This is the city's main gate, and the lord himself is the colonel-in-chief."

"That's a title of honor," Ironwood explained for Nistur's benefit. "In most armies, every regiment has a colonel-in-chief, usually some lord who reviews the troops once or twice a year and is never seen otherwise."

"The North Gate is the second most important, and if s commanded, supposedly, by lord Rukh, the greatest of the Inner Councilors. The South Gate is under Councilor Blasim, a fat, useless fellow. There's an old harbor gate also. It's walled up now, but it's under a Councilor Mede. He's a banker, so that should tell you how much good he is. Councilor Melkar is the only one who has any soldierly qualities. He's in command of the fort at the southwest corner of the walls. There's also a Councilor Alban, but he's too old even to pretend to do any soldiering."

With the unreassuring words of Captain Karst in their ears, Nistur and Ironwood began walking south along the encircling wall of the city. The engines were being put back in repair, and the walls were well provided with missiles such as stones, javelins, and darts, but at intervals the two came to gaps in the wall that were bridged by wood, sizable sections of wall that had collapsed outward, and patches of heavy brush that had grown right up to the base of the wall, where enemies could find cover.

"The captain has little confidence in the great nobles of

Tarsis," Nistur observed, "but he seems to think the defenses sufficient to keep out the nomad rabble."

"Which is true as far as it goes," Ironwood said, "but there is much he isn't saying."

"What do you mean?" The defenders they passed on the wall were mostly shopkeepers, apprentices, workmen, even a priest or two, with only a leavening of the hardbitten mercenaries whose discipline and skills would be so crucial once battle was joined.

"I mean, why is Kyaga making no preparations for a storming of the walls? Is he really a fool? I think not. Everything I have heard about him says he is shrewd and foresightful. No bungling oaf could unite all those squabbling tribes, no matter how many holy men proclaimed his coming."

"Then perhaps he does not intend to make a fight of it. Perhaps it is all intimidation."

"Or perhaps he has other plans to take the city," Ironwood said.

"Such as?"

"Such as, some treacherous councilor who has already agreed to open a gate for him, so he doesn't have to storm the walls."

"Oh. That is a daunting prospect."

By the time the sun was at the horizon, they had made a full circuit of the walls and were back at the East Gate. They descended to street level and began to walk back toward the harbor.

"What do you think?" Nistur asked.

"I think we had better find that killer," Ironwood answered him.

"Tell me your thoughts, then."

"Escape from this place is hardly possible now. I watched the nomad patrols while we toured the walls, and they are as efficient as any I've ever seen. We'd be nothing but target practice for them. They have this city closed up tight."

"But you think the demand for the killers is a ruse, do you

not?"

"I think so, but even a savage chief like Kyaga must hew to certain appearances. If he says he won't attack if the killers are turned over to him in time, then he must hold off, at least until he has an excuse. He'd lose face among his subchiefs if he went back on his word."

"That would buy us some more time," Nistur said.

"And possibly put us in his debt. There is something else to consider."

"If it is hopeful, please tell me."

"These nomads," Ironwood pointed out, "are expert at their own type of warfare, which is mainly raiding. They can assemble for a big attack like this as long as they don't have to wait too long. They are not disciplined soldiers, who know that real warfare means a great deal of waiting. To nomads, the sheer excitement of war is important.

Lacking that excitement, they will lose interest."

"Their patrolling will become lackadaisical and inefficient?"

"Right. And by small groups, and then by whole tribes, they will begin to drift away from the army in search of excitement. When that happens, the others will start to worry about the families they left behind on the plains."

"Prey to hereditary enemies?"

"Exactly. Every day we buy makes us a little safer and escape a little more likely."

"Then," Nistur said, "whether we like it or not, we must act like detectives. And we must be good ones."

* * * * *

This time when they knocked at the door in Stunbog's hulk, the barbarian woman admitted them readily. "The old man's been expecting you," she said. Her rough-edged sibilants and abrupt vowels made her words difficult to understand, but her gestures were easy enough to interpret.

"We had thought he would be surprised," Nistur said, doffing his hat and brushing the light dusting of snow from it.

"Pleased, but not surprised," said the healer from the rear of

the vessel. "Come on up and warm yourselves."

They climbed the stair to the great cabin and accepted cups of mulled wine. Ironwood set a large bag on the table.

"Here," said the mercenary. "There're a couple of roast ducks in here, and some fruit and fresh-baked bread, little enough to begin repaying your kindness. The council hasn't thought to clamp rationing on the city yet. It must have been ages since they've withstood a siege."

"Not since long before living memory serves," Stun-bog affirmed.

"You were expecting us?" Nistur asked, taking a warm, bracing draught of the wine.

"Word came to me this morning that you were out of jail, and a little later that Shellring was out as well. That must have taken some cleverness to pull off. Tell me about it while we eat."

With the viands spread out on the table and each of them making inroads in them according to the dictates of appetite, Nistur and Ironwood regaled their hosts with their story. Myrsa looked doubtful, but Stunbog laughed heartily through most of it.

"For sheer, brazen effrontery, you two are a match for any ten rogues of my acquaintance," said the old man when they were done. "To devise such a story took no small degree of imagination. But actually to go about making a reality of it, that is the stroke of pure genius!"

"It is not such a flight of fancy," Nistur said, "when you consider that nobody in this city has any idea what a criminal investigator is supposed to look, act, or speak like, nor even what such a person is supposed to do at all. Who is to say that we are not the very pattern of such a team?"

"A good point," Stunbog allowed judiciously. "I personally have never met such a person."

"How long can you fool them?" Myrsa asked, half a duck gripped in her big-knuckled hands.

"No need to," Nistur said. "We will catch the murderer,

whoever it may be, and we shall do it within the time allotted." Her answering snort carried equal parts skepticism and derision.

When Ironwood next raised his cup, his hand trembled slightly. Stunbog noticed the subtle movement instantly.

"You, my friend, must rest. As your healer, I order it."

Ironwood seemed about to make a curt reply, then thought better of it. "Yes, you are probably right. We must be up early if we're to catch our prey."

"Good advice for any hunter," said Myrsa.

"I shall turn in shortly myself," Nistur said, "but I want to hear Shellring's report when she returns."

Ironwood went toward his cabin, and Myrsa rose and stretched her long arms. "I will sleep by the door. I'll wake when the girl comes." She disappeared below, leaving the healer and the ex-assassin alone.

"Is another seizure coming on?" Nistur asked quietly.

"No, it's too soon. But our friend is far from fully recovered, whatever he may think."

"And there is no cure?"

"None that I know of." Stunbog glanced shrewdly at Nistur.

"But when he dies, you will be free. Is that not what you wish?"

Involuntarily, Nistur's hand went to the mark beneath his jaw. "You know about that, then?"

"The Knot of Thanalus is known even to those who are not terribly learned in the Arts."

"To answer your question: at first I was distressed and resentful. But now... I cannot say that I enjoy being bound to another, but somehow I cannot help liking the surly rogue. Despite his manner, he is not a brainless lout like so many of the mercenaries. He has accepted his terrible fate with a certain grace, and he adheres to a personal code of honor, which many more fortunate persons do not."

"True, true." Stunbog took another drink, then spoke quietly.

"And you, my friend. Were you not growing weary of your

life? Had the assassin's trade not come to sicken you even before you were hired to kill a man already doomed?"

"You miss little, old man," said Nistur in a near-whisper.

Stunbog nodded. "Aye. In my long life I have met humans and dwarves and elves of all conditions, in every sort of distress and predicament. When one has come to the end of a life he has chosen in error, the signs are plain to see, for one who has the eye for it."

"In truth, I have always thought of myself as a poet. Unfortunately, we live in an age wherein poets do not receive the esteem that once they did."

"It is sad but true," Stunbog agreed.

"And what of you?" Nistur asked. "These books and articles of magic"—he waved an arm, taking in the cluttered cabin—"are not the belongings of a humble healer. You are more than you seem."

After a long pause, Stunbog nodded. "It is true. Once, when I was very young, I aspired to be a great mage. I traveled widely, seeking out wizards of power to learn their craft. In my youthful arrogance, I began to think myself the equal of the greatest mages, ones far older and wiser than I. I offended them with my pretensions and my greed to know their most powerful spells.

"One wizard after another to whom I had apprenticed myself expelled me. They protested that one such as I would never be worthy to take the Test at the Tower of High Sorcery, would never qualify for any of the Orders of Magic. Fool that I was, I thought I could attain the greatest magnitude without the Test, that I needed no Order, for I esteemed the limitations imposed by the Orders to be fit only for lesser wizards. I desired the freedom to act exactly as I wished, beyond the strictures of Good, Neutrality, and Evil.

"I confess that I stooped to the most unscrupulous tactics to secure rare and mighty techniques. I essayed spells that were far beyond my youthful skills, spells that should be attempted, if at all, only by wizards of much experience and

great strength of character. Maturity is as important in sorcery as in government or any other serious activity."

"So I understand," Nistur murmured sympathetically.

"In time, so arrogant, so full of myself did I become that other magicians came to despise me, mages older, wiser, and in some cases far more evil than I. For in my own feeble defense I must protest that I never thought to become a wizard of the Black Robes. My flaws were those of ambition and impetuosity."

"Perfectly understandable," Nistur said. "You were, after all, quite young."

Stunbog laughed. "You have a rare gift of diplomacy, my friend. It disguises well what a dangerous man you are. But then, lions are the color of grass, and sharks are the color of their native waters. Even predators must have protective coloration."

"You are perceptive. So your ambitions led you into folly?"

Stunbog's smile went away, and his visage darkened. "Folly of the most dreadful sort. To impress my betters, whom in my vanity I perceived as rivals—great must have been their amusement at that particular bit of presumption—I sought to perform a spell that had not been attempted, even by magicians of the highest rank, in more than five hundred years. I cannot even repeat its name to you, for so potent is its power that certain preliminary rituals of protection must be performed before it can even be discussed, and then only among initiates of certain arcane mysteries."

"It sounds like a daunting rite," Nistur said.

"That is far too mild an expression. It was more than merely deadly, it was catastrophic, not only to the practitioner but to all who dwelled around him. My colleagues, who had by this time all become my enemies, cooperated to thwart each step of the ritual as I performed it, mining every bit of its baleful influence against me. Had I been a great wizard, I would have detected their

interference with ease and taken steps to protect myself. But then"—he shrugged his bowed shoulders with resignation—"had I been a great wizard, I never would have attempted anything so foolish."

"Ah, but the impetuositities of youth are common to all of us. Why, I, myself—"

The healer held up a forestalling palm. "Do not overdo the commiseration, my friend. Even when sincerely meant, a simple assurance is usually sufficient."

"Your pardon." Nistur bowed slightly, fingers of one hand spread upon his breast.

"No offense taken, I assure you. To continue: I completed the spell in every detail, glorying in what I thought to be my tremendous power and expertise. I stood there in triumph, surrounded by my sigils, my magical artifacts, all the glowing and glamorous effects of my chosen art..." His words trailed off, his eyes distant as he looked back across the years toward what Nistur was certain must have been his last happy moment

"And then?" Nistur asked quietly.

"And then," Stunbog continued, his face transformed into a mask of bitterness and regret, "I heard the sounds of horror and desolation from all around me. I was not elevated among spirits of vast power, as I had anticipated. Instead, I was in my wizardry lair as before, but my fires and candles were dimming, as if covered by some unseen candlesnuffer. The beams and stones overhead creaked with strain, and fine powder sifted over me, as if I were in an ill-constructed tunnel that was about to cave in. I knew then that I must have performed some part of the rite incorrectly, although I could not imagine what it might have been.

"Fearing the collapse of my lair, I stuffed my books and such instruments as I could salvage into a great bag and carried it all out." He gestured around the cabin. "Much of what you see here is what I contrived to salvage. I ran from the building, and even as I broke out into the light, I heard it

shudder behind me. But the sight that greeted my eyes was so terrible I did not even turn around to see my home fall and become dust.

"As far as I could see, every building, every house and barn and shed, was disintegrating. The leaves withered and fell from the trees; the crops shriveled in the fields. The people were running from their crumbling dwellings, keening laments at this catastrophe. The cattle bawled in the fields, for the grass had withered, and the water holes were drying up."

Stunbog took a deep breath and a deeper draught of his mulled wine; then he went on. "All day long I wandered through that blasted landscape. Everything made by human hands had crumbled to dust. Except for the folk themselves, every living thing was dead or dying. And when the people saw me, they knew. Before they had feared me, but no one was afraid of my magic. When they saw me, unharmed, still in my ritual garments and bearing the great bag of my belongings, they stoned me and drove me forth. Had they not been so shattered by what had befallen them, they would have torn me to shreds.

"In time I came to untouched lands. Still I did not understand. I sought out the local mages, pleading for some aid in undoing what I had done. They all laughed at me, even the kindest of them. The punishment for folly is inevitable and irreversible, for a wizard. It must be borne. I protested that it was not just that my neighbors should suffer for my stupidity. The wizards were pitiless. Justice is for the dealings of ordinary folk, they told me. Justice is a man-made thing, an idea enforced by courts and rulers and judges. It has nothing to do with wizardry, which has different rules. I, an aspiring wizard, should know this, surely."

The old man shook his head. "How they delighted in pushing my humiliated face into the foul puddle of my idiotic arrogance. Well, if there was any justice in the business at

all, that was it. In the end, when I came to understand the profundity of my guilt, I forswore all practice of wizardry. I donned the garments of a healer, and from that day to this, I have never touched magic, save for creating some very minor, beneficent potions that promote healing."

Nistur was pleased to detect a slight note of pride in those last words. "I think you are too hard on yourself, my friend. And surely your many years of good works have earned you atonement. They should have brought you peace as well."

Stunbog shook his head. "A single human lifetime is not enough"

"Where was this land of yours?"

"That, I will not reveal. When I left, I did more than change my calling. I gave up my homeland and even the name by which I was known."

"Stunbog is not your birth name then?"

"No. In my childhood, Stunbog was an addled beggar who wandered the back lanes of my homeland, an object of derision, living on the charity of farmers and townsfolk. I thought it fitting that I should adopt his name."

"And how does one such as yourself, devoted to humility and good works, come to have a devoted companion as misanthropic as that formidable barbarian woman? If the question is not too personal, that is."

Stunbog sighed. "Hers is a sad story, and not a pretty one. Some years ago, while wandering in the cold waste, I came upon her on an ice field. She was half-frozen and terribly wounded, more than three-fourths dead. She had been attacked, very brutally raped, and left for dead."

Nistur's eyebrows rose. "By someone very large or else very numerous, I suppose."

"You may be sure of that. All around were signs of a terrible battle in which more than one man had died. Preserving her life was a deed I would rate among my finest, were I to allow myself vanity. Healing her mind was more difficult. She tried to kill herself frequently during the first year. Except for me,

for whom she shows an almost embarrassing devotion, she has little use for humanity. None at all for men, and only an intermittent ability to form friendships with other outcast women, like young Shellring."

"Quite understandable, under the circumstances. But why for outcasts?"

"Because that is what she was. Myrsa's mother was of the mountain folk. Her father was a barbarian of the ice. Their tribes would not countenance their union, so they fled to the wasteland to live alone and raise their daughter. In time they were hunted down and killed by one tribe or the other, I am not certain which. The girl escaped and lived for several years by using her hunting and other skills. She hired out as a freelance warrior from time to time, but she was never amenable to discipline. In time, she fell afoul of the bandits who nearly killed her. Luckily, I happened along soon afterward."

"Lucky, indeed," Nistur said. There was a knocking, clumping sound from below. Moments later, the barbarian woman appeared, and behind her was Shellring. The thief rushed to the little fireplace and warmed her hands.

"Were you able to learn anything?" Nistur asked.

"Nothing on the street." Her hands warmed, Shellring dropped her cloak, turned around and began to warm her backside. "The temperature's dropped out there. It's freezing. No, I can't get a word out of any of the beggars or thieves or night-stalkers. The gangs I avoided as always. But I got one lead that may be worth following."

"What might this be?" Nistur asked.

"I ran into old Granny Toadflower in the herb market. Actually, she came up to me. She said come by her place tomorrow. She knows something that can help us. I've no idea how she found out about us. She disappeared as soon as she issued her invitation." The thief accepted a mug of warmed wine from Myrsa.

"Granny Toadflower?" Stunbog said, astonished. . "What can

that old creature have to impart?"

Shellring just shrugged.

"Who might this oddly named person be?" Nistur asked.

Stunbog's eyes twinkled. "Let's just say you are in for a treat."

Chapter Seven

"Who is Granny Toadflower?" Ironwood asked, seeming more irritable than usual.

"Someone who thinks she has information we can use," Nistur replied, as imperturbable as always.

The two of them stood on the shell-and-trash-littered harbor bottom outside the door of Stunbog's hulk. There were patches of snow here and there but, Nistur noted, the snow in Tarsis never seemed to be deep enough to be truly attractive. Shellring joined them, wrapped in her thin, ragged cloak and shivering.

"Why don't you steal yourself a decent cloak?" Iron-wood asked her.

"If you get too warm and comfortable, you get slow," she replied with bravado. Then, more subdued, she said, "Besides, if I had a good one, someone would just steal it from me."

"There must be a certain art to your life," Nistur observed.

"You must acquire possessions sufficient to sustain life, yet these must not be of such quality as to make you tempting prey for thieves far more ruthless than yourself."

"It's always a problem," she admitted as Stunbog and Myrsa emerged from the hulk. The barbarian woman wore her customary leather garments and a fur-trimmed hat, but she did not bother with a cloak, nor did she draw

on the embroidered gloves she carried beneath her belt. Apparently it took weather far more severe than this to make one raised in the icy wastes wear extra clothing. Myrsa's only weapon was a broad-bladed knife that resembled a pointed cleaver.

"Are you two sure you wish to accompany us?" Nistur asked.

"Allowing us accommodation is one thing. Going along with us in town is quite another. You could find yourselves sharing our enemies, who, I expect, will be numerous."

"Some oddity of fate has thrown us together," Stunbog said.

"When the gods have designed thus, it is unwise to struggle against them. Besides, you are the most interesting people I have come across in some time. I am curious to see how you accomplish your task."

"And you?" Ironwood asked Myrsa. "If you are fond of us, you hide it well."

"I go with Stunbog," she said expressionlessly.

"Then lead on, Shellring," Nistur said.

They passed among the grounded ships and the clean-picked ribs of the craft that had been scavenged for firewood and construction materials. A flight of brick steps led up to what had been the old stone wharves and the waterfront, an area characterized by tumbledown taverns built of scavenged materials and grafted onto the surviving sections of the warehouses and chandleries that had once serviced the maritime trade.

Most of these helter-skelter structures backed against the harbor wall, a continuation of the defensive wall encircling the city. In the center of this wall was the old harbor gate, once the city's most magnificent, now blocked up with stone since there was no more harbor traffic. Its low postern remained, and the five companions passed through it with little notice from the somnolent guards. Clearly, no danger was expected from the harbor

side, for its terrain was exceedingly hostile to the tactics favored by the nomads, and it was assumed they would concentrate their attack, if any, on one of the gates that could be opened.

Shellring led them through a district of homes, shops, markets for food, spices, livestock, fabrics, perfumes, medicines, cutlery, and furniture, as well as other commercial establishments, skirted north of the great plaza

before the palace, and into the Upper City. Here, instinctively, they walked with their hands on their weapons. In the other districts of town, the inhabitants had looked them over with curiosity or indifference, but with neither alarm nor hostility. Here, they were examined from doorways, shuttered windows, and dark alleys by predatory eyes.

"I calculate we have passed five different bands of thugs," Nistur said, "but none have offered us harm."

"The Green Dragons and the Scorpions are the only ones that might bother us," Shelling said.

"Why is that?" Ironwood asked her.

"We have three fighters here. The gangs want at least three to one odds in their favor before they attack. Those two are the only ones with nine or more members."

Ironwood snorted contemptuously. "They'll need more than three to one."

"They don't know that," she replied. "Nistur doesn't look like a trained fighter, and Myrsa isn't wearing armor or a sword. They might think three to one's enough."

"Will they attack while Stunbog is with us?" Nistur asked.

"My impression is that he is highly regarded in this city."

"Nobody's safe from attack in this part of town," she told them. They followed her down a narrow alley, and she stopped before a low doorway beneath a crude wooden sign. It was painted on what had once been a shutter, by a hand that clearly did not belong to an artist. The design was simple, a staring eye done in cheap paint. All around the eye had been fastened oak twigs with leaves and acorns attached.

"In many lands," Nistur said, "this is the sign of a fortune-teller. Is it so here?"

"It is," Stunbog said. "Granny Toadflower is a seer of sorts."

"Is she a mountebank, or has she the true gift?"

"Oh, she's real enough," Stunbog said. "Sometimes."

They ducked low and passed within. The smell that struck

them caused Nistur and Ironwood to recoil slightly. Even Myrsa wrinkled her elegantly broken nose. The odor was compounded of decaying foodstuffs of both animal and vegetable origin, sour ale, mildew, swamp gas, and essence of tomcat. Two such cats glared at them from opposite sides of the room, each having apparently staked out half the room as its territory. As the visitors' eyes grew accustomed to the gloom they saw that the room itself had apparently fallen into some disarray during the Cataclysm and had not been tidied up since.

Heaps of indescribable junk were stacked everywhere: broken furniture, cracked vessels, bales of moth-eaten cloth, shattered statuary, defaced paintings, and utensils of doubtful function. This was, clearly, the lair of a compulsive scavenger.

"I've seen prettier bear dens," Ironwood said.

"Granny Toadflower," Shellring called. "It's Shellring, and I've brought my friends, like you asked."

They heard shuffling sounds from the rear of the dwelling, and a curtain was pushed aside. The creature that emerged from the back room was about three feet tall, with a head grotesquely large in proportion to its body. Its hair, had it been clean, would have been white. Its face seemed to consist of equal parts mottled, pale skin and warts. The beady little eyes, a muddy green in color, regarded the visitors with cheerful dementia. The mouth opened in a face-splitting grin, revealing wide-spaced yellow teeth. The stench in the room redoubled.

"Welcome!" it shrilled. "Granny Toadflower don't get visitors so much! Hee-hee-hee!" The laugh assaulted their ears with physical pain.

"I can't imagine why," Nistur said.

"A gully dwarf?" Ironwood said, incredulous.

"Aghar," Stunbog admonished him. "Mind your manners."

The ancient Aghar waddled up to Ironwood, seized one of his hands, and ogled the broad palms, long fingers, and large

knuckles. "Good to meet you, cousin! Hee-hee-hee!" Ironwood snatched the hand back as if she had burned it and thrust both hands beneath his cloak. Granny Toadflower twirled around three or four times, giggling and snorting. She wore layers of black rags that were dulled by mildew around the hems.

Abruptly she stopped in midtwirl, staring brightly at her visitors. "You bring Granny food?"

"We never neglect a friend," Stunbog said, holding out a bulging sack. The old Aghar snatched it and thrust a dirt-crusted paw inside. She withdrew a small loaf and jammed it into her mouth, chewing as she fished in the bag for more goodies.

"I see you enjoy good health, Granny Toadflower," Stunbog said. "Your appetite seems healthy enough."

She mumbled something, but it was unintelligible since she was simultaneously stuffing in a dried fish to accompany the bread.

"At this rate she'll choke," Ironwood said with a certain note of hopefulness.

"Food was never made in sufficient quantity to choke a gully dwarf," said Nistur.

When Granny Toadflower had regained use of her mouth for speech, she made a beckoning gesture and disappeared through the curtained doorway.

"Guess it can't smell worse than here," Myrsa muttered.

"I wouldn't wager on it," Nistur said.

"No help for it," Stunbog observed. "Let's see what she intends." The little group passed through the doorway, Ironwood and Myrsa having to duck their heads and turn their shoulders sideways to squeeze through.

They passed through a bedroom that did not bear close inspection, and they averted their eyes from its contents. The next room was all but bare, with a dirt floor, walls shored up with broken timbers, and a ceiling that appeared to be in imminent danger of collapse. The only object in the room

was a rough but undistinguished stone in the center of the floor. It was gray-black, about the size of an average building block, and unornamented except for some flowers that had expired long before. Withered petals lay around its base. Granny Toadflower was stroking the stone, crooning, her eyes shut.

"If this is how she does her seeing," Nistur observed, "wouldn't it make more sense to do it in the front room?"

"Remember who she is," said Stunbog. "Her folk are not noted for efficiency or great powers of logic."

"She's good at this," Shellring said, defensively. "Just give her a chance."

The watery old eyes snapped open. "Tell Granny your trouble," she hissed.

"There has been a murder..." Nistur began hesitantly.

"Dead nomad!" she screeched. The others covered their ears. "Got a wire round his neck!"

"How did she know that?" Nistur said, uncovering his ears.

"Granny knows stuff," Shellring said. "Go on, Granny."

"You tell Granny more!" she demanded. "The barbarian chief wants the killer or there will be war—"

"War!" she screamed. "Good pickings after a war! Whoop!" She jumped up and down a few times, hooting and whooping.

"How good to know that someone finds the prospect pleasing," said Nistur. "To continue, the Lord of Tarsis wants us to find the killer, but we must question many people who may have done the killing, would just as soon kill us, and may have tried already. Perhaps I should explain. Someone hired me to kill my new companion Ironwood—"

"You no killer!" she cried. "You poet-man! Put words together, make 'em rhyme! Hee-hee-hee!"

"Never has my art been defined so succinctly. Yes, I am a poet. But in my former occupation, a great noble hired me ... What are you doing?"

The old Aghar was rummaging in his purse. "You got any

sugar?"

"Try to keep your mind, as it were, on our problem," Nistur admonished patiently, pulling his purse from her filthy hand. Stunbog handed her a stick of hard candy, and she gnawed it with a blissful expression on her wizened features.

"There's a nomad shaman," Ironwood offered. "We think he may be—"

"Green-face wizard!" she shouted. "Lotsa amulets! Skins and rattles!" She shook her head, waved a hand dismissively. "Him nothing."

"That is comforting," Nistur said. "If we don't find the killer, the Lord of Tarsis will kill us, or the chief of the nomads will torture us to death, a threat I do not regard as idle."

"Yep. He do it. Cut you up in little pieces, burn an' brand an' . . . an' ..." She seemed to lose her train of thought, which the others regarded as a blessing.

"And," Stunbog added, "our warrior friend here suffers from a unique difficulty. He was bitten by a young black dragon."

"That all?" she asked.

"Do you find these matters insufficient?" Nistur demanded.

She ignored him and climbed on top of her rock. Pointing at Ironwood, she intoned, "You come here." He stepped over to her. "Stoop down!" He bent so that their faces were on a level. For long moments she stared into his eyes with unsettling fixity. Abruptly, she pressed her hands against his breast and shoved him back, howling with laughter. She leapt from her stone in a backward somersault, then did handsprings around the small chamber, whooping and giggling.

"It's not enough that she's a gully dwarf," Ironwood said bitterly. "She's insane as well."

"Perhaps," Stunbog said. "But insanity never impeded a seer's vision."

"You're no prize yourself," Myrsa added.

Suddenly exhausted, the old Aghar sat on the floor, her back against the stone, her feet stuck straight out ahead of her

while she gasped and wheezed and tried to catch her breath. Then she pointed at Ironwood.

"Your problem not dragon!" she screeched. "Your problem not barbarian chief! Your problem the musician!" At the last word Ironwood looked as if he had been slapped, recoiling as from a physical assault. She howled with laughter. "Got you there, eh? Hee-hee-hee." With another mercurial change of attitude she pointed directly downward, jerking her finger down repeatedly for emphasis. "You want cure for dragon bite? Down there! Find the lightning-worm!"

"The what?" Nistur asked, but she was already on her feet in a tumbler's spring and whirling. She came to a halt in front of them. "Barbarian chief! Green-face shaman! Noble councilor! Musician! Hee-hee-hee!" She went into a veritable ecstasy of chuckling. "All of them! There is one! There is one! False eyes! False eyes!" Her own eyes rolled up in their sockets, and she trembled all over. Suddenly, she threw up her hands and fell onto her back, her fists and heels drumming on the ground for several seconds, the violence of her convulsion propelling her tiny body all over the room. Finally her head fetched up against the stone, and she calmed, then lay still. Stunbog crouched beside her, felt for a pulse, and peeled back an eyelid.

"Is she dead?" Shellring asked hesitantly. She wore a concerned expression. The others just looked confused.

"No," said the healer, "she is asleep. A full stomach and a fit of prophecy can do that to a gully dwarf." He looked up at his companions. "It is a well-known phenomenon." He straightened. "We'll learn nothing more here. Myrsa, put her on her bed and let's leave this place."

The other three did not wait to see the barbarian woman carry the gully dwarf to her malodorous bed, but instead fled the dwelling with almost indecent haste. When they were outside, they breathed deeply for a while. Even the air of the alley smelled good after Granny Toadflower's lair. When Stunbog and Myrsa rejoined them, Nistur was first to speak.

"That was a waste of bread and dried fish."

"Do not be so sure," Stunbog cautioned. "That was a prophetic trance if ever I've seen one. The problem is, with the likes of Granny Toadflower it can be difficult to distinguish a trance from her normal state." He cocked a sardonic eyebrow toward Ironwood. "What's this about a musician?"

For once, the steely mercenary seemed hesitant and almost tongue-tied. "It was . . . long ago. Maybe I'll tell you someday. Not now."

"It is your privilege," Stunbog allowed. "Still, she struck home there, didn't she? So perhaps the rest of it was as pertinent."

"Why must seers always speak in obscurities?" Nistur complained. "Granted a gully dwarf is hard put to string three words together coherently at the best of times, but a simple, straight statement would be much appreciated at this juncture. 'There is one!' she said. Well, of course there is one! We have to find him before our time runs out. Speaking of which, that time gets shorter by the minute."

Ironwood snorted. "False eyes! What drive!"

"And what did she mean by a lightning-worm?" Myrsa asked. Shellring frowned. "There's an old story . . ."

"Yes?" Stunbog said encouragingly.

"It says there's some kind of monster down below the city. It used to come up and eat people. See that drain?" They were back on the street now. The drain indicated was a broad, circular hole in the center of the street, half-choked with leaves, branches, and other debris. It was covered by a rusted grate of heavy iron. "They say all the drains are covered by those grates so the monster can't come up and snatch people."

"Every place has a story like that," Ironwood said. "There's always a monster in the nearby lake, or on the mountaintop, or in the deep swamp. Nobody's actually seen it, but they know someone who has, or their grandmother saw it."

"How could it help Ironwood's condition anyway?" Nistur asked.

"A magical beast?" Stunbog hazarded. "There is ample precedent for such things. I know the properties of many such."

"We have no time to go traipsing through the sewers of this city, even if a cure is to be found there," Nistur pointed out.

"We've spent too much time here," Ironwood proclaimed, shaking off his foul mood. "Whether we've wasted it, I suspect we'll learn soon enough."

"Maybe I shouldn't have brought you here," Shellring said.

Nistur placed a hand on her shoulder. "Nonsense. You found a lead, and we had to follow it. Oh, well, I suppose it is time to call upon the great lords of the city."

"No," Ironwood said. "I want to go out to the nomad camp first. Perhaps I'm wrong, but I have a feeling the savages will be far easier to read than the masked, two-faced aristocrats of this place."

"You may be right, and in any case I do not think it matters greatly whom we approach first. By all means, let us go and see these colorful brutes at close range."

"Hey, there!" The shout came from ahead of them, and suddenly there were seven sullen, ragged young men filling the street in their path. A further shuffling of soft-booted feet announced the arrival of five more behind them. A few of them held swords; the rest had makeshift weapons of chain and wood, including a few nail-studded clubs. Despite their youth, every one of them bore a thoroughly depraved face.

"Green Dragons, or Scorpions?" Nistur asked Shellring.

"Dragons and Scorpions," she answered. "Not all of both gangs, but enough."

"And do they customarily cooperate?"

She shook her head. "Never."

"I see." Then he addressed the gang members at large.

"Gentlemen, before you make a terrible and truly

irreversible mistake, I urge you to allow us to pass."

They snickered as if they had never learned to laugh outright. "Pass?" said a sandy-haired lout, somewhat taller than the others and apparently the leader. "Would we be here if all we were going to do was let you go?"

"Very well, then," said Nistur, "it is clear that someone has hired you to kill us. Perhaps we can better his offer."

"That's a good one," said the leader. "Forget it. You can't match his offer." He pointed at his cohorts, naming them as he did. "Snake, Buzzard, Louse, you three take the big woman. Lefty, Dagger, and me'll get the chubby one. The rest of you kill the warrior. Forget the cutpurse and the old man. We'll catch them after we're through with these three."

"Chubby one, indeed!" Nistur said indignantly. His sword was out, his small shield in his left hand even as the gang members began to close in. Ironwood had blades in both hands, and the two went into a back-to-back stance as if through long practice. Then Myrsa shoved Stunbog between them and her broad back made it a triangle, with Stunbog in the center, hastily joined by Shell-ring. The cutpurse had a stone in each hand and was looking for targets, her face pale but unafraid.

The three assigned to Myrsa attacked first, full of confidence. Without hesitation, the barbarian woman grabbed the smallest of the three by his collar, ignoring the steel-tipped club that he tried to swing too late. She hurled him against the other two even as she drew her cleaverlike knife. Before the attackers could regain their balance and clear their weapons, her blade made two hacking cuts in a huge X, and the three screamed and fell back, bleeding from ghastly cuts.

"First blood to Myrsa!" said Nistur, who had caught the action from the corner of his eye, not taking his attention from the men in front of him. "Come now, who else wants to kiss steel?" The three were disconcerted to see the one assumed to be the softest of the fighters standing so

ready, in fact eager, to fight.

"Get him, Lefty," hissed the leader.

The one thus named slid in with his short sword held low for a gutting stroke, his right forearm held across his torso as a ward. He was quick as a lizard, but his blade rang on the little shield, and an instant later he cried out as the tip of Nistur's basket-hilt sword nicked a tendon on the inside of his wrist. The leader thought he saw an opening and darted in, his sword almost at full extension. Nistur sidestepped the thrust almost lazily and punched with his left hand. The shield met the leader's face with a sound like a skillet swung with both hands. The leader went down like a sack of rocks, and the one called Dagger displayed a sudden disinclination to engage.

Ironwood just stood, smiling. "Come, now, surely someone else wants to play." Two stones whistled past his shoulders, and a pair of unsuspecting thugs, their attention on the wrong adversary, groaned and staggered back, hands to bloodied faces.

"Hey!" Shellring yelled. "It's five to three now, and that's not even counting me! You sure you want to hang around?"

The five unhurt gang members stood gaping, their weapons forgotten in their hands. Slowly, hesitantly, one step at a time, they began to back away. When they had put ten paces between themselves and their intended victims, they whirled and ran off at top speed. The six wounded by blades and stones staggered away less precipitately.

"Grab one," said Nistur, keeping his words, for once, to a minimum. Myrsa grasped the collar of one of the youths struck by Shellring's stones. Blinded by blood that ran into his eyes, he had staggered into a wall.

Ironwood sheathed his unbloodied weapons. "That wasn't much fun," he said, disappointed.

"They'll send better talent next time," Nistur assured him.

"Here, you." He addressed the wounded thug. "Who hired you?"

"Are you going to kill me?"

"If you don't answer," Ironwood assured him, "I will." "It was some big lord. I didn't talk to him." "Who took the money? Was it your leader?" Nistur demanded.

"That's right. He went to the Scorpions to get some extra help. The lord was paying enough for us to set aside our feud for this job, Rockfist said."

"Exactly what were your instructions?" Nistur prodded.

"Kill the mercenary in the dragon suit, and the ... the whatever he is, the chubby one with the old sword, and the cutpurse."

"The three carrying the lord's seal," Ironwood said. "What about the others?"

"We weren't told about any others, but we agreed not to leave any witnesses behind." He might have been discussing a trade in the marketplace, apparently quite happy to be allowed to breathe for a few minutes longer.

"Did you see what this lord looked like?" Nistur asked.

The youth shrugged. "He wore a mask, like they always do. I don't think it was a real lord anyway. Probably just a servant. Real lords don't come to our part of town."

"Oh, I don't know," Nistur said, surveying the ruins all around. "It has a certain charm, if you've a taste for such things."

"Huh?" said the thug, brightly. Nistur ignored him and turned to Stunbog, who crouched beside the felled leader.

"Is he able to talk?"

"Talk?" said the healer. "He can barely breathe." The young man's shattered face was a mask of blood, the flesh already so swollen that the eyes and mouth were defined only by three slits. Bloody froth bubbled from the nostrils. "I wouldn't have believed you could inflict such damage with one short punch from a little shield like yours."

"I have my moments," Nistur said complacently.

"Wouldn't do any good if he could talk," Shellring told them.

"This one's probably right. The lord would have sent a

chamberlain or one of those high-ranking servants. He wouldn't have come himself. And nobody'd know who he was, anyway. Common people never see the nobles close up."

"Undoubtedly," said Nistur. "Come, let's go while it is still early."

"Aren't you going to kill me?" the thug said, sounding almost disappointed.

"I know that this will shake your sense of propriety to its foundations," Nistur informed him, "but no, we are not going to kill you."

The youth shrugged. "Suit yourself. I won't argue."

"When you can see again," Ironwood advised him, "drag your leader home. Or leave him where he lies, as the fancy suits you. Come along," he said to the others, striding eastward.

"I don't think either of them will last long, disabled as they are, in this part of the city," Stunbog said.

"Then Tarsis will be a better place," Shellring asserted. "They came to kill us. If they live, they'll kill somebody else. It's what they do. Don't waste your sympathy."

"It's just the way he is," said Myrsa. "Too softhearted."

Nistur stroked his beard in thought. "Those scum were ill-armed, even by the standards of scum. Shortly after my arrival in this fair city, I saw two gangs fighting below my window. They used two-handed slashing swords. They were inferior weapons, but far more formidable than those these rogues carried. We might not have come off so lightly had our late assailants been so armed."

"If they all had swords," Shellring said, "then you saw gangs from one of the nice parts of town."

* * * * *

They parted company at the East Gate. Captain Karst would allow through the postern only those who bore the lord's seal.

"We shall rejoin you this evening," Nistur told Stunbog and

Myrsa. "Or not, as the case may be."

"I think," said Stunbog, "that we should all ponder Granny Toadflower's words. There was far more in them than seems apparent."

"At the moment," Nistur confessed, "I am so confused that even the obvious is daunting to me, let alone the obscure. Let us learn what we can, and perhaps all will become apparent in time."

"Perhaps so," said Stunbog. "Good fortune to you, my friends."

A pair of guards swung the small but heavy postern gate aside, and the three passed through, their seals prominently displayed. Behind them the postern swung shut, and there was a metallic clash as the bolts were shot home. Before them, a long bowshot away, the enemy host stood glaring at the unwelcome visitors.

"Kyaga said they'd respect these seals," Shellring said with sudden trepidation in her voice. "Do you think they'll obey him?"

"Let us hope so," said Nistur.

"If they don't," Ironwood said with a sardonic smile, "we probably won't suffer long."

Shoulders squared, heads high, the three strode toward the nomad army, displaying far more confidence than they actually felt. Ironwood and Nistur, wise in the ways of the world, knew that the discipline of barbarians was a chancy thing at best. Shellring, so self-confident amid the savagery of her home city, was in an alien land the moment she set foot outside its walls. Here, every blade of grass seemed threatening to her.

As they neared the host, some of the nomads stared at them sullenly, but none tried to bar their way. Some spared them a passing glance; most ignored them entirely. As they walked through the camp they saw that the host, which appeared so homogeneous from a distance, was actually made up of many distinct peoples. Some resembled Myrsa:

large, fierce-looking folk dressed in skins and furs, many of them wearing hats of wolf or fox pelt. Others favored extravagantly long robes of colorful cloth, and these wore close-wrapped turbans, their faces veiled to the eyes. Besides these two types were many others, distinguished by their own styles of clothing, paint, and tattoos. Among the colorful warriors were many persons wearing simple clothing, unarmed, their hair cropped close to their scalps.

"Does short hair mean a slave among these people?" Nistur asked.

"It does," Ironwood affirmed. "Captives from the towns near the wasteland, I'll warrant. I don't see a single, genuine barbarian among these slaves."

"Where are we going?" Shellring asked, her confidence returning as the barbarians showed no interest in killing her.

"The big tent," Ironwood said. "I want to talk with this Kyaga Strongbow face-to-face."

"As it so happens, I think that is a sound course of action," Nistur agreed, seeming slightly put out that Ironwood was assuming the lead.

Before the immense tent in the center of the camp, an honor guard took their ease. Some rested on the ground before the tent, others were mounted, surrounding the chief's standard. All these were barbarians of the veiled sort, and despite their slothful pose, the eyes above the veils were alert and suspicious.

"They don't seem too concerned about Kyaga's safety," Shellring noted.

"Don't be deceived," said Ironwood. "You see how they hold their lances?"

"Sure," said the thief. "That one with the blue scarf is leaning on his like he's half-asleep, and the two on horseback have them slanted over their shoulders like boys with fishing poles, and those three next to the doorway are using them to hold themselves up while they throw dice, and the one that's snoring has his across his knees. What of it? It looks

sloppy to me."

"Every one of them," Nistur told her, "grips his weapon at the balance-point. One false move from us, and we will be skewered from six directions. These are not back-alley thugs to be dealt with casually."

"Oh," she said. "Well, I never had anything except Tarsis town guards and drunken mercenaries to judge by. I won't forget."

As they neared the tent, a man stepped before the entrance, his hand on his sword-hilt. He wore a robe striped purple and black, and above his veil his eyes were bright blue and unwavering. "What do you want?"

"We are the investigators commissioned by the Lord of Tarsis to look into the murder of Ambassador Yalmuk Bloodarrow. In accordance with the agreement between our lord and your chief, we come to question certain persons within this camp. We would speak first with Kyaga Strongbow."

Keeping his right hand on his hilt, the guard stretched forth his left, palm up. Nistur placed his seal in the palm, and the man examined it closely, first one side, then the other. Returning it, he examined the other two as minutely. Satisfied they were genuine, he turned and passed into the tent. "Follow me," he said.

They went within, and here they found more guards lounging about. Inside, the tent was draped with magnificent silk hangings, dyed in amazing colors and embroidered in a hundred fanciful designs. Beautiful lamps of silver and gold and carved amber hung by golden chains from arching roof-supports made from the slender ribs of some enormous beast. The floor was covered with carpets, and here and there braziers of exquisite workmanship sent up perfumed smoke to dull the more disagreeable odors of the camp.

"I see Kyaga has little use for the austerity for which his fellow nomads are famed," Nistur noted.

"They didn't make us surrender our weapons," Shell-ring

said.

"They aren't afraid," said Ironwood. "Nor should they be."

All the guards rose to their feet as someone emerged from another room of the huge tent. The man was taller than Ironwood, his height emphasized by his turban. His robes were of purple silk, his veil revealing only his brilliant green eyes. After him came the shaman, his green-painted face obscure beneath his amulet-draped headdress, and behind him was an ominous figure, scale-armored, in a bronze mask. For a long moment Kyaga Strongbow studied them silently; then the veil creased slightly, as if the man wearing it were smiling.

"You are the investigators appointed by the Lord of Tarsis?" The wrinkles at the corners of his eyes deepened with amusement. "I expected distinguished noblemen, perhaps experienced public officials or military officers. Instead he has sent a rogue sell-sword, an urchin of the streets, and a popinjay!"

"I grieve that we disappoint you so," Nistur said.

"Not at all! I feared that I would be bored. Instead I find myself vastly amused. Be seated, my friends. You are under my protection, and now you must enjoy my hospitality."

"You are kind," Nistur said, seating himself on a silk cushion stuffed with fragrant herbs, "but we must be brief. By your own decree, our time is extremely limited."

"Surely it is time enough for persons as clever as yourselves," said Kyaga.

"How good it is to enjoy your confidence."

"Among my people," said Kyaga, "it is accounted a rudeness to speak too quickly of important matters. However, since your time is limited, let us dispense with the amenities and discuss your business while we partake of refreshment."

Crop-headed slaves of both sexes brought in platters heaped with flat loaves, dried fruit, and skewers of sizzling meats. It was typical nomad fare, but the wines they decanted were of fine vintage, and the goblets were of amethyst crystal.

"The late Yalmuk Bloodarrow," Nistur began, "belonged to a tribe conquered by you two or three years ago, is that not so?"

"He was a chief of the Blue Mountain nomads, and yes, it was necessary to convince that people forcefully of my right to rule. Since that time, they have been my loyal followers."

"And yet," Nistur said, "it may be that old rivalries are not so easily eradicated. During the time that the Lord of Tarsis and his great nobles entertained your embassy, prior to your arrival, there were detected certain, shall I say, tensions among your followers of high rank."

"Is this so?" said Kyaga, sounding neither surprised nor alarmed. "Might you be more specific?"

"The lord himself," Nistur said, "heard exchanges of some acrimony between Yalmuk and your shaman, Shade-speaker." He nodded toward the bizarre figure who sat just behind Kyaga. Through the obscuring strings of amulets, the brown eyes regarded him with no readable expression.

"And what do you conclude from this?" Kyaga asked him.

"That the two were jealous of one another. Each thought the other to be too influential, too high in your esteem. Among men of ambition who seek to rise in their lord's favor, such rivalry is more than sufficient to warrant murder."

"You think Shadespeaker slew Bloodarrow?" Now he sounded truly amused.

"I do not consider him to be above suspicion."

"There is a flaw in your suspicion."

"That flaw being?"

"Shadespeaker was with me the whole night of the murder."

"Indeed?" Nistur said, nonplussed. "And yet, I thought you did not arrive in the camp until the next morning."

"I had promised my chiefs that I would rejoin them no later than that time. As it occurred, I arrived in camp just after sundown the evening before. I spent the night in counsel with my shaman."

"I see," said Nistur, disappointed. "And yet, there were

among the envoys certain subchiefs who indicated mutual resentments and even, I grieve to inform you, certain dissatisfactions with your overlordship."

"Say you so? And you heard this from the Lord of Tarsis himself?"

"From his own lips," Nistur agreed.

Now Kyaga Strongbow laughed richly. "Let me tell you what you really heard, my friend. You heard a conniving, treacherous lordling seeking to poison my mind against my loyal chiefs! He tries to sow dissension in my host, setting tribe against tribe by stirring up old feuds. He wants me to think that my chiefs plot against me, and he tries to convince them that I treat them shabbily, not rewarding them as they deserve."

Now he raised a hand as if taking a vow. "But I tell you this, and you may take my words back to the scheming Lord of Tarsis: Kyaga Strongbow is no fool! And he has no fools for subchiefs, either. Yes, I heard from their own lips how the lord and his councilors entertained them, flattered them, tried to buy them off and set them against me, even as I had told them would happen. The loyalty of my followers remains unshaken!"

"I am sure that this is so," Nistur said smoothly. "Nonetheless, we must follow every lead, in order that we may render a full and complete report to our lord. Surely you understand this."

Kyaga spread his hands and appeared to smile again. "But of course." The gaze of the green eyes settled on Ironwood. "Your friend speaks little."

"He hears much," Nistur said. "And he acts decisively."

"Both are good qualities," Kyaga commended, "in a counselor or in a warrior."

"And I assure you he is both. Now, about your chiefs..."

Kyaga stood abruptly. "I do not wish to be rude, but I have much to do. My army prepares for war. You have the freedom of my camp. You may enter any tent and question anyone of

whatever rank."

They stood, and Nistur bowed. "We take our leave of you then. Never fear, we shall deliver the murderer to you within the stipulated time."

"See that you do." With these words, Kyaga stalked from the tent. A great roar went up from the host outside at sight of their adored, conquering chief.

The three lingered in the tent for a few minutes longer, saying nothing. Then they strolled outside. Kyaga had ridden off somewhere, taking most of his honor guard with him.

"What do you make of him?" Ironwood asked.

"He is nothing like my expectations. He is no crude barbarian; that is for certain. If the Lord of Tarsis thinks he can play easy political games with this one, he is much mistaken. Kyaga is subtle and possesses a certain wit."

"Aye, I'll warrant he's no sort of barbarian at all. No wonder he wears that veil. I'd wager that, his features are unlike those of any tribe here but, because he is veiled, all can imagine his features as they would like them to be."

"Another bit of subtlety. He spoke to me, but his eyes were on you most of the time. Do you think you have encountered him before?"

"Perhaps in some army years ago ..." He paused, features twisted in thought. "But no, I surely would remember such a man."

"Perhaps," Nistur said noncommittally. "The way he insists on the loyalty of his followers causes me to suspect that he is deeply suspicious of that loyalty."

"At least," Shellring said, "now that he's fed us, we can believe we're really safe. I've always heard these nomads are serious about hospitality, that when someone's eaten your food in your tent, you can't attack him without angering the gods."

"That is the rule," Ironwood agreed. "Even if it's your enemy, you can't chase him after he's left your camp, until a day

and a night have passed."

"On the other hand," Nistur said, "I doubt that Kyaga Strongbow worries much about the good opinion of the gods."

Chapter Cight.

"Where do we start?" Shellring asked.

"With the one named Guklak," said Nistur.

They walked through the vast, sprawling camp, asking directions occasionally and eventually arriving at the encampment of the Great Ice River nomads, of whom Guklak was chieftain. These people dwelled in low, dome-shaped tents of felt, and their horses were small, shaggy-haired, and sturdy. Somewhat shorter in stature than some of the other nomads, they wore their yellow or red hair in innumerable thin braids, heavily greased. There seemed to be as many women among them as men, and the women were all warriors. Both sexes were heavily tattooed with abstract designs.

Before the chief's tent stood a standard twenty feet high. From the standard's many crossbars hung human skulls. The three detectives studied this ominous device for some time, looking about for someone who could inform them if the chieftain was anywhere to be found.

"A fine standard, is it not?" They turned to see a man standing behind them, looking up at the skulls with deep satisfaction.

"Splendid, indeed," said Nistur. "I take it that these were the heads of prominent warriors?"

The man nodded. "Every one of them a chief slain in battle by my ancestors. Now their courage and cunning belong to the tribe."

"You are Guklak?" Ironwood asked.

"I am. Guklak Horsetamer, fifty-fourth chief of the Great Ice River people. My ancestors have held the northwest mountains for a hundred generations, since we took them from the snake-men when the gods were young."

"Until Kyaga assumed overall leadership, that is?" Nistur said insinuatingly.

"Kyaga Strongbow is not an ordinary man," Guklak maintained stoutly. "He is a great conqueror, touched by the gods, prophesied by a shaman. It is no disgrace to acknowledge him my master. In the past, my ancestors followed great war chiefs and incurred no dishonor thereby." He glared at them as if challenging them to contradict him.

"I certainly did not mean to suggest such a thing," Nistur assured him. "Kyaga Strongbow must rejoice to have so loyal a follower. In fact, he has told us that all of his chiefs are as keen and as true to him as you are."

The blue eyes narrowed. "We are his to command. Some of us, though, are stronger in our loyalty than others."

"How stood Yalmuk Bloodarrow?" Ironwood asked.

Guklak looked the mercenary over, evaluating. "You have the look of a hired warrior, not an official of Tarsis."

"Whatever we were before," said Nistur, "we are investigators now. We seek justice for the murder of Yalmuk Bloodarrow. Was his loyalty as great as yours?"

The chief thought a while before speaking, then replied, "Yalmuk was a brave man and a wise warrior, but he was proud and stiff-necked. He did not bow easily to the yoke of Kyaga Strongbow."

"And yet Kyaga entrusted him to carry out negotiations with Tarsis," Nistur prodded.

"Kyaga is generous. He often secures the loyalty of wavering men by showing them special honor and trust.

Many of his personal guards are warriors who swore to slay him during the wars. Besides," he added, "Yalmuk was in charge only until Kyaga himself arrived to take over."

"We heard there was bad blood between Yalmuk and the shaman, Shadespeaker," Ironwood put in.

Guklak spat to leeward. "I have nothing to do with the shaman, if I can help it. I have little use for them as a whole. Shamans should utter prophecy and otherwise stay out of

the affairs of men."

"Kyaga seems to find him useful," said Nistur.

The chief shrugged his brawny, leather-clad shoulders. "Shadespeaker foretold his coming and so must be honored. The spirit world is all around us; the spirits of our ancestors must be consulted and kept informed. For these things we need the holy men. But when one seeks to influence the deeds of chieftains, a warrior does well to keep his hand on his sword, and his bow ready-strung."

"I see," said Nistur. "Now, we were told of a subchief named Shatterspear."

To their astonishment, Guklak broke into roaring laughter. "I am sure you heard no good of him! He is chief of the Foul Spring tribe. They are a contemptible people, and he exceeds them in all contemptible qualities."

"And yet your chief esteems him," said Ironwood.

"The Foul Spring folk are wealthy, for their lands lie athwart a caravan route, and they levy toll on every pound of goods that passes through. But Shatterspear is a fool, and his wealth flows through his hands like sand. Yes, go and talk to him. You look as if you are in need of a good laugh." Chuckling and snorting, Guklak pushed aside the door curtain of his tent and ducked within.

"Yalmuk?" cried Shatterspear. "What do I care about that rogue?" Although the hour was still early, the chief was half drunk and was apparently working on a total stupor before sundown. He had long, drooping mustaches beside his mobile-lipped mouth, and his eyes were red with drink and the smoke that filled his lavish tent. His clothing was lavish as well, cut like the hides his people wore, but made of silk instead. His broad, flat hat was rimmed with ermine skin, and his braids were woven through golden beads and pierced pearls. The tips of his mustaches were tied to golden rings, and these were connected to the ruby studs in his ears by thin, golden chains. The grip of his long, curved sword was of ivory.

But all his trappings did not lend him majesty, nor could they hide the fact that Shatterspear, despite his rank and his vaunting name, was a weak, foolish man. No wonder Kyaga Strongbow kept him close, Nistur thought. A man like this could be used, and he would never present a serious threat.

"And yet," Nistur said, "he was murdered, and we have been charged to find his killer."

Ironwood leaned forward. "His killing dishonored your chief. Don't you want to avenge this insult to Kyaga?"

"Kyaga Strongbow is a great leader," the nomad sneered, "but he is one chief among many, merely the head of our council. Why, I myself—" A broad hand came from the dimness behind him and shook his shoulder. A high-ranking warrior, who clearly felt his chief had said too much, moved into view.

With annoyance, the chieftain shook off the hand. "I am Shatterspear, and I speak my mind!" He turned back to his guests. "Yalmuk Bloodarrow was a treacherous scoundrel who deserved to die, and whoever killed him can live a long, happy life for all I care. Kyaga is better off

without him. Maybe now he will give proper honor to those who have serv—have cooperated with him in making the tribes of the Plains of Dust into a great nation."

"I am sure that so wise a chief as Kyaga withholds no honor from a chieftain as distinguished as yourself," Nistur said.

"I speak foremost in the counsel tent," Shatterspear asserted. "I am a leader in the host, with the place of honor upon the right wing."

"I see, and most worthy of your distinctions, I am sure. A great chief must repose confidence in his finest warriors and his chieftains of high lineage." He paused, as if a random thought had intruded on him. "But, it seems to me that Kyaga depends on the influence of his shaman as well. What is the fellow's name? Ah, Shadespeaker, that is it."

"Ha!" The laugh was a yelping bark. "Shadespeaker! That

fraud hasn't the courage to speak out among true warriors. He only whispers in Kyaga's ear, filling it with poison against the chieftains, whose rightful authority he envies!" Again the hand went to his shoulder. Again, he shrugged it off.

"And yet, did he not prophesy the coming of Kyaga?"

"He did, and who knows but that Kyaga himself put him up to it? Oh, I do not fault the chief for employing a useful tool, but now it is as if he takes the green-faced jester seriously!"

"Did Yalmuk feel the same way about him?" Ironwood asked.

"All of us feel that way, although some pretend to honor him. After all, what has this Shadespeaker done save proclaim Kyaga's ascendancy? I have never seen him call up the spirits of the dead at the midwinter rite. Ghostbrother, our own tribal shaman, does that every

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year. He interprets for us the will of the Foul Spring spirit. Our ancestors come to him in dreams, and he makes their wishes known. Shadespeaker does none of these things, yet Kyaga spends whole nights in counsel with him, with no one in attendance except for a tongue-less slave."

"I see," Nistur said. "Did Yalmuk Bloodarrow feel as strongly about Shadespeaker? Did he perhaps insult him to his face?" Shatterspear's weak features assumed an expression meant to convey shrewdness. "You mean, did the shaman kill him?"

"Kyaga himself has assured us that the shaman was with him all that night, but it does not mean that Shade-speaker could not have had someone else do the killing for him."

"It seems to me," Shatterspear said, "that you are doing all you can to make it look as if Yalmuk was killed by one of us. I think the Lord of Tarsis killed him. Perhaps Yalmuk demanded too high a price to turn traitor."

"You think he was bargaining with the lord?" Nistur asked.

Again the barked laugh. "I was one of the envoys, remember? Those Tarsian nobles were all but promising us their wives and daughters if we would betray our chief. Why, lord Rukh—" Now the hand clamped on his shoulder with

real force, and this time Shatterspear seemed to consider his words.

"Well," he continued, "never mind. Yalmuk was murdered by the lord, or by some other Tarsian, it matters not. The killing was a deliberate provocation, and there will be war. We will turn Tarsis to ashes and dust, and its presence will no longer blight our plains."

"Too bad for you," Ironwood said.

"What do you mean?" Shatterspear demanded.

"Tarsis is a gathering place for the caravan trade. If it is destroyed, the routes will change. There won't be so many caravans passing through your territory."

As the implications sifted through the fog of Shatterspear's mind and his expression transformed into one of dismay, the investigators quietly took their leave. Outside the lavish tent, Nistur chided Ironwood.

"You should not have slipped that burr under his saddle. We do not want Kyaga to think we are here to stir up trouble."

Ironwood grinned. "I couldn't help it. That puffed-up buffoon needed to have his vanity punctured."

"What do we do now?" Shellring asked, squinting at the angle of the sunlight. "Isn't it about time to go back to the city?" Their prolonged stay in the camp was eating at her nerves.

"Not just yet," Nistur said. "There is another person I wish to speak with."

A tall man emerged from the tent behind them. He wore hide garments like the other warriors, but his were of the finest quality and embroidered with silken thread. His was the hand that had so frequently gone to Shatterspear's shoulder.

"I am Laghan-of-the-Axe, first subchief of the Foul Spring tribe." The man hitched his thumbs into a coral-studded belt that held the vicious weapon for which he was named.

"And we are most honored by your acquaintance," Nistur said.

"My chief," Laghan said, "is a wise and brave leader. Sometimes he drinks too much, and then he says things he would not even consider saying at better times. You would do well not to take too seriously what you just heard." His right hand was no more than an inch from the haft of his weapon. Ironwood's was an identical distance from his own hilt. The two men were like tomcats with the fur standing up along their spines.

"Oh, by no means," said Nistur soothingly. "We are persons of honor and would never take advantage of a man's moment of weakness. We will not repeat a word of this to Kyaga, nor to the Lord of Tarsis. Our only concern is to find Yalmuk's murderer."

Laghan relaxed a little, and his hands fell away from his belt. "That is good. Keep to that course, and you will have no interference from us."

"Who do you think killed Yalmuk?" Ironwood said.

Laghan looked them over for a while. "My thoughts are my own. Kyaga said you were free to ask, not that we had to answer. You two"—he looked from Nistur to Ironwood, ignoring Shellring—"do not have the look of Tarsians. My advice to you is this: forget about finding Yalmuk's killer. If you want to get away from Tarsis fast, just come out through one of the wall breaches at night and pass through our part of the camp. No one will hinder you, I'll see to it."

"A generous offer," Nistur said, "but we have our duty."

Laghan shook his head. "You are not so foolish as that. There is no honor in serving dishonorable villains." He turned and went back into the chieftain's tent.

As they walked away, Nistur shook his own head, laughing quietly. "This camp is as bad as Tarsis, rife with mutual suspicions and rivalries and power plays."

"There is a difference," Ironwood told him. "These barbarians look you in the eye and speak their hatreds aloud for all to hear. They may be savages, but they are honest."

"An honest man will kill you as dead as any rogue will,"

Shellring said sourly. "Where are we going?"

"Why, to the shaman's tent, where else?" Nistur informed her.

The tent of Shadespeaker abutted the great tent of Kyaga Strongbow. It was made of black hides, painted with arcane designs, hung all over with small amulets of iron, bronze, wood, stone, and bone. Some of these were in animal form, others of abstract design. There were also the dried carcasses of birds, bats, and other small animals affixed to the tent, interspersed with dolls in human form, some pierced with nails and tiny daggers.

"I don't like the looks of this place," Shellring said.

"I suspect that to be the effect intended," Nistur said.

"Why don't I just wait out here while you two go in and talk to him? You wanted me because I know the city, not this place."

"You come with us," Ironwood told her.

"Oh, yes," Nistur agreed. "Your clever eyes and subtle ears might take notice of things that we miss." He rapped at a doorpost, and a short-haired slave came out. The man looked them over with quick brown eyes.

"We have come to speak with Shadespeaker," Nistur told him. "Be so good as to summon him. This is by the authority of Kyaga Strongbow himself."

The man said nothing, but he held the doorflap aside and gestured for them to enter. They ducked below the wooden lintel and passed within. At further gestures from the slave, they seated themselves on leather cushions, and the slave disappeared into a rear compartment of the tent.

"A man of few words," Ironwood commented.

"With good reason," said Nistur. "He is tongueless."

"He must be the slave that drunk said attends Kyaga and the shaman," Shellring noted.

"Undoubtedly," Nistur said. "It is not at all uncommon for sovereigns to have servants who cannot speak, and therefore cannot betray secrets."

Shellring looked all around. "What a spooky place. I don't like it here." Amulets and dried animals were hung all over the tent. In one corner sat what appeared to be a mummified human, its withered features leering at them with toothless mouth and eyes like dried dates. In a tiny hearth smoldered bundled herbs that sent up a foul-smelling smoke.

"Stunbog's cabin is full of magical artifacts," Nistur pointed out.

She shrugged. "That's different. I know Stunbog is never going to cast spells on people or call up the dead. I think the dead ought to stay that way." She looked with wary horror at the mummy. "And they shouldn't be used to decorate your house, either."

"Why," Nistur said, "that could be a beloved ancestor. Think what interesting conversations they must have. I can see how such a persort might make an amusing companion when one has tired of the company of these barbarians, for their store of casual discourse is uncommonly limited."

"Oh, be quiet!" she snapped. "You shouldn't joke about such things!" Between the barbarian camp and the shaman's uncanny tent, Shellring's nerves were near the snapping point, so Nistur did not bait her further.

From the rear of the tent there came a shuffling, rattling noise, and through a curtained door came Shadespeaker. In the gloom of the hide tent, he was little more than a shapeless mass. Then he tossed a handful of something on the hearth, and the fire flared brightly although, strangely, it put out no heat. Now it was bright enough for them to discern the color of his green face paint, and to make out the brown eyes behind the bizarre strings of amulets. Before, in Kyaga's tent, he had been obscured by the chief's presence. Here, in his own lair, Shadespeaker was a formidable and frightening figure. He stood before them for a moment, then sank down on a cushion.

"What do you wish of Shadespeaker?"

"We have certain questions to ask you," said Nistur, "concerning Yalmuk Bloodarrow."

"Yalmuk is dead," said the shaman. "Do you wish me to contact his shade, so that you may speak with him?" Even through his heavy accent, they could hear the amusement in his voice.

"Do not seek to toy with us," Nistur warned him. "We have permission from Kyaga himself to question whom we wish, including you."

"Do you think you know Kyaga Strongbow as I do?" said the shaman. "It was I who proclaimed the coming of the great conqueror. I went out on the icy plains, fasting for many days, seeking a vision. I cut myself and let my blood flow out onto the snow until I was more dead than alive. And when I was nearly dead the spirits of the Plains and the ghosts of my ancestors vouchsafed unto me that which I sought."

He cast something onto the cold fire, and this time it flared a brilliant green. "I saw before me a mighty white stag, ten times the size of a true stag of flesh and bone. This was a spirit stag, and it was whiter than the snows of the plains. A golden griffon rose up before the stag, and the stag slew it, then leapt into the sky and ran among the stars."

The green flames died down, and the shaman regarded them soberly. "All the tribes of the Plains of Dust, whatever their sort, are descended from the magical white stag. The griffon to us means the cities that surround the plains. I knew from this vision that a great chief would soon come to unite the tribes and destroy the cities."

"Why do you wish to destroy them?" Nistur asked. "Surely you depend upon them for much you cannot produce for yourselves."

"It is not fitting that free nomads should depend in any way upon the weak, degenerate people of the cities. Better that they should all perish, and we return to the ways of our ancestors. Where the cities now stand, soon there will be only grass, and our herds will graze there."

"What a melancholy thought," Nistur said. "However, we are not here to be won over to the cause of Kyaga Strongbow. We are here to find out who killed his ambassador."

"It does not matter," said Shadespeaker. "The Tarsians killed him. When we have killed everyone in Tarsis, he will be avenged."

"A thorough vengeance," Nistur agreed, "but only if it was a townsman who did him in. We are not so convinced."

"Then you are fools. All the chiefs here hate one another. Many had old feuds against Yalmuk and his people. But Kyaga put an end to their feuds."

"It's one thing to submit to a high chief," Ironwood said. "It's another to forget the enmity of generations. Perhaps someone here decided his devotion to a feud outweighed his loyalty to Kyaga."

"Or," Nistur said, "perhaps some ambitious, jealous person"—he looked the shaman up and down with open insinuation—"found that he could tolerate no rival for the esteem of the chief."

Shadespeaker's expression, obscured by amulets and paint, seemed to be amused. "And if so? Surely it would be easier for such a one to kill Yalmuk out here on the Plains. In the city, nomads are closely watched." He grinned. "If you"—he pointed at Nistur—"wished to kill him"—his pointing finger swung toward Ironwood—"would you lure him out here to the nomad camp and commit the deed where you are a stranger and all eyes must be drawn to such a sight?" He laughed softly.

"No, my friend," he went on. "You would accost him in some back street of the city, where you feel at home, where no one will spare a second glance for such as you."

"I concede that you make a strong point," Nistur admitted.

"And you—" The shaman addressed Ironwood. "You have a more important quest than finding the slayer of Yalmuk."

"What do you mean?" Ironwood demanded.

The shaman leaned close, his eyes wide and so dark the

irises could not be distinguished from the pupils. "I see the deathly illness in your face, and I see the trembling of your hands. Your friends cannot see these things with the eyes of the body, but I can see with the eyes of the spirit. The sting of the black dragon is slow, but it is sure."

"There is nothing to be done about that, and it does not bear on our mission!" Nistur said sternly, his equanimity slipping for once.

"Are you so sure of that?" said the shaman. "Do you believe that the healers and wizards of your cities know all there is to know of the Arts? I myself have raised from near-death men and women your sorcerers would have given up for dead."

"I thought you raised them after they were dead," said Shellring, greatly amazed at herself for speaking up. He turned the piercing brown eyes on her, and immediately she regretted her rashness.

"You are not one to speak of sacred things, thief!" he hissed.

"On the contrary," Nistur said coolly. "She is a serving official of the Lord of Tarsis, empowered by him and, I remind you, by your own sovereign, to speak as she pleases to any subject of either ruler. Do not underestimate the gravity of our mission or overestimate your own importance, shaman."

For long moments the tribal wizard was silent. "I am not accustomed to being spoken to thus. I punish terribly those who insult me."

Ironwood leaned forward. "Your pride does not interest us. If we don't find the killer, we die anyway. So save your threats."

Shadespeaker seemed to smile behind his amulets. "There are worse things than mere death. But this talk is futile. What do you want of me?"

"We have heard," began Nistur, "that you and Yalmuk Bloodarrow had, shall we say, a certain mutual aversion and —"

For once Ironwood interrupted his loquacious companion.

"We are wasting time, and we have little left. Shadespeaker, did you kill Yalmuk?"

The shaman sneered. "Shadespeaker does not slay with weapons!"

"Did you hire or in any way command or coerce another to kill him?" Nistur asked.

"Never!"

"Wouldn't you be about it if you did?" Shellring said.

Unexpectedly, the shaman laughed. "This is like watching a wolf chase its own tail! Enough of this! Look here." He rose and crossed the tent to an intricately carved wooden chest. Returning, he set a folded leather packet before them. This he unwrapped, and as he did Shellring noted peculiar sigils painted or tattooed on the backs of his hands.

Open, the packet revealed a handful of yellowish crystals that might have been hardened tree sap, and a twisted, dried root that resembled a skeletal human hand. "Do you know what this is?" Shadespeaker demanded.

"I confess I do not," Nistur answered. He looked at Ironwood, but the mercenary just shook his head.

"This is the Hand of Truth, and one who tells a falsehood under its spell suffers terrible harm."

"I believe I may have heard of the spell," Nistur said.

"Then behold." The shaman sprinkled the yellow crystals into the brazier, and the flames died down to a sullen red glow. Carefully, he laid the dried root on the coals. They expected to see the root consumed, but instead it remained whole while flames of dazzling white shot up from the fingerlike appendages.

His eyes closed, Shadespeaker muttered something in a strange language. Then, his eyes open once again, he thrust his left hand into the white flames and held it there. While they held their breath, the flames above his hand writhed, slowly coalescing into a fiendish face. It had three eyes and stubby horns, and its mouth was lined with long fangs. The mouth moved, and the voice that came to their ears was

chillingly inhuman.

"Speak," hissed the voice, "and if thou liest, thy hand is mine." The mouth gaped until it engulfed the shaman's hand, the fangs lengthening so that they seemed to touch the flesh. The shaman did not change expression, nor did he look at the apparition. He was silent while the others sat in quiet dread; then he began to speak.

"These are the words of Shadespeaker, shaman of the nomads of the Plains of Dust. Shadespeaker did not slay the chieftain Yalmuk Bloodarrow. Shadespeaker did not cause another to slay Yalmuk. Shadespeaker does not know who slew Yalmuk, nor why. If Shadespeaker lies, may the truth-fiend devour his hand."

They held their breath, teeth clenched, waiting for the fiend to decide. Slowly, the hideous head backed away, and the yawning mouth closed. "Thou speakest the truth, and I hunger." It began to fade, like dissipating smoke. As it did the voice came to them again, faintly. "Bring me a liar."

The flames died down, and the shaman reached into the brazier and withdrew the hand-shaped root. It showed no damage from its sojourn among the coals. "Are you satisfied now?" he demanded.

"I suppose we must be," Nistur said, getting to his feet.

"For now," said Ironwood.

"Forget about finding the slayer," Shadespeaker told him.

"You are a doomed man anyway."

Ironwood's hand went to his sword hilt. "There is no real need for you to outlive me, shaman!" he snarled.

"Your threats are idle, mercenary," Shadespeaker sneered.

"And yet," he went on more reasonably, "my chief has need of brave fighting men. If you were to swear fealty to Kyaga Strongbow, he would wish me to help you. As his loyal shaman, I would have to obey."

"What do you mean?" Ironwood hissed.

The shaman rose. "My chief needs me." He walked to the back of the tent; then he turned. "You had better find your

killer. Time grows short." He pushed the curtain aside and was gone.

"What could he have meant?" Ironwood said as they went outside.

"He was just trying to distract you," Nistur assured him. "He wants us to be confused, and he knows how to work on one's weaknesses. He saw the signs of your infirmity and went to work on you. Half of a mountebank's art lies in sowing confusion so that one fails to notice the most blatant trickery."

"Do you think that spell was false?" Ironwood asked.

"I think I know who can tell us," Nistur answered.

As they passed through the postern of the East Gate, Captain Karst accosted them. "The lord sent a messenger," he informed them. "You are to render your report to him this evening. Be at the palace at the sounding of the sunset gong. In case you are unfamiliar with the customs of the city, it is rung when the sun touches the western horizon, not after it is down."

"Thank you, Captain," said Nistur. "We shall not fail."

Ironwood squinted at the angle of the sun. It was yet only late afternoon. "Two hours until the gong rings. Where do we go in the meantime?"

"To Stunbog's vessel," said Nistur. "I have certain questions to pose to our host."

Stunbog looked up from his book as they entered, with the barbarian woman close behind them. The tome appeared to be a manuscript treatise on the properties of magical beasts.

"I rejoice to see that you suffered no further misadventures," Stunbog said. "How went your mission?"

"I wish you could have accompanied us," Nistur said, seating himself. "Your expertise would have been most welcome during our last interview."

"It is still at your disposal, even at second hand. Tell me what happened." The healer listened attentively as Nistur and Ironwood described their uncanny visit with Shade-speaker.

Several times he interrupted and made each of them give a close description of some aspect of the experience.

"What you have described," the healer said when he was satisfied, "sounds like an authentic spell of truth. The properties of an artifact such as the Hand of Truth are all but impossible to falsify, and there are terrible penalties visited upon those who would even attempt to conjure a fraudulent representation of a truth-fiend. Believe me," he added ruefully, "I know all about penalties of that sort."

"Then he was telling the truth?" said Ironwood, disappointment heavy in his voice.

"Almost assuredly," Stunbog answered.

"And he is a genuine shaman, not a fraud?" asked Nistur.

"That is not so certain," Stunbog told him. "Like the simple love spells sold by witches, that particular spell of truth may be prepared by a wizard, then used by one who has had certain minimal training in this single art. Having used it, the uninitiated would not be able to prepare another such spell."

"Just a minute," Shellring interrupted, "I just remembered something."

"Please tell us," Stunbog urged.

"Well," she began, a bit self-consciously, "I noticed something on the back of Shadespeaker's hands. It was like, I don't know, a sort of squiggly design, maybe a tattoo."

"You mean a sigil?" Stunbog prodded.

"I guess that's what you call it. Like some kind of magical mark, anyway. I was wondering whether maybe it was some sort of protective spell that kept the fiend from biting his hand off."

"I remember the mark," Nistur said, "but the thought did not occur to me."

"Aye," said Ironwood, "the same with me. Well done, Shellring."

"Can you reproduce it for me?" Stunbog asked. He gave her a scrap of parchment and a charcoal stick. With the tip of

her tongue protruding slightly from the side of her mouth, Shellring began, inexpertly, to draw. When she was finished, she pushed the rendering across the table to the healer.

"There. That's not it exactly, but I think it's close."

Nistur squinted at the cursive design, with its numerous cross-hatchings and hooked protrusions. "Yes, that is much as I remember it. I wish now I had paid closer attention."

Ironwood nodded agreement.

Stunbog pondered for a while. "I do not recognize it, but there are so many. It doesn't look like a protective talisman, which is odd. Myrsa, please take down my gri-moire of sigils and talismans. It is the thick one on that upper shelf, between the retort and the crystal mortar."

Myrsa took down the heavy tome and set it before Stunbog. He opened it to the first page. There were at least twenty-five arcane designs on the page, and below each were several lines of minuscule writing.

"Is each page like that?" Nistur asked, appalled.

"Yes," said Stunbog. "On some pages there are even more. Garlak's Catalogue of Sigils is one of the standard reference works, and much prized. There are more than fifteen thousand sigils listed here."

"Then our task may be long over, one way or another, before you find this one," Ironwood said bitterly.

"And yet I shall try," Stunbog said. "I think Shellring may have found something important. The task is not as hopeless as it seems. The sigils here are grouped by certain distinctive traits of design. With an exact copy of the sigil you saw, I could locate it quickly. But, with a little time, this approximation may be enough."

"Let us hope so," said Nistur. "The crucial hour draws on apace."

Chapter Hine

They hurried through the streets of Tarsis, whipped by a cold wind. The sky was still bright, the setting sun glaring red from the undersides of a few high-flying clouds, but the

streets were in deep shadow.

"We stayed too long in that tavern," Shellring fretted. "We'll get to the palace late."

Nistur belched softly. "I am not about to face the Lord of Tarsis on an empty stomach. A couple of pints of ale make his sour face more endurable."

"We'll probably cool our heels for a couple of hours in an anteroom before he deigns to see us, anyway," Iron-wood grouched. "That's how these lords usually behave."

To their surprise, they were ushered into the lord's presence the moment they set foot across the palace threshold.

"I should have remembered," Nistur muttered under his breath as they were conducted down a long hallway, "the Lord of Tarsis is just another jumped-up merchant. Such people are sticklers for punctuality."

"You are late," the lord observed upon their arrival.

"Your service is arduous," Nistur said. "Our efforts on your behalf have kept us uncommonly busy."

"Then you must learn to make better use of your time," the lord admonished them. "What have you to report?"

Patiently, Nistur related the gist of their interviews with the barbarians. The lord attended to his report with considerably less patience.

"You have wasted an entire day!" he said when Nistur was finished.

"I beg your pardon? It was my own impression that we had learned much of value." Nistur was more than a little put out at this dismissal of their efforts.

"Forget the barbarians! Even if one of them committed the murder, Kyaga would never admit it. I want you to concentrate on certain nobles of this city. Here is a list of their names, together with the locations of their mansions."

"You mean, my lord," said Nistur, "that you would rather the murderer were a Tarsian noble?"

"I must be fair and evenhanded, after all," said the lord.

Ironwood looked at the list over his companion's shoulder. "If

I recall aright what Captain Karst said, these are all members of the Inner Council."

"Alas, that I should have to suspect such distinguished men," said the lord, "but these are the ones who had closest contact with the envoys while we treated with them. They had them as guests in their own houses and made, shall we say, certain proposals to them. Councilor Rukh, in particular, was most vigorous in his efforts."

"I take it, then," said Nistur, "that Councilor Rukh is one you would not be aggrieved to see enjoying the tender mercies of Kyaga Strongbow?"

"I said no such thing!"

"So you did not. Well, then, if there is nothing further to detain us, we shall go and sound out these councilors."

"Bring me the killer quickly!" the lord insisted. "Time grows short!"

"As we are all too aware," said Nistur, bowing.

Outside the palace, in the grand plaza, they consulted with Shellring. "They live in parts of town I've not visited much," she told them, "but I can find them all. But what are we to make of this? I'd have thought he'd be anxious to pin the blame on the barbarians."

"I think I understand his motivation," said Nistur.

"So do I," said Ironwood. "He'd rather get rid of a rival than deal with a foreign enemy."

"And if we give him a councilor," Nistur added, "he shall have accomplished both goals at once. A rival will be done for and, perhaps, Kyaga will be satisfied and return to negotiation. Either way, he will have bought some time."

"Maybe," Shellring hazarded, "he won't expect you to provide a lot of evidence."

"That is likeliest of all," said Nistur.

* * * * *

They found the residence of Councilor Rukh in an area of the city hard hit by the Cataclysm. His fine mansion was of relatively recent construction. His ancestors had taken

advantage of the catastrophe, demolishing a whole block of damaged buildings to provide the house with fine, spacious lawns and gardens. These were currently sere and leafless, but even in winter's desolation, their symmetry could be appreciated.

At the door Nistur raised a massive bronze ring gripped in the jaws of a hideous bronze monster and let it drop. Minutes later, a majordomo opened the massive door, and the three presented their royal seals.

"My master has been expecting you," said the servant in a voice of utter boredom. "Follow me." He led them through a vast, echoing hall and into a much smaller but still spacious drawing room. The room was lined with formal portraits of noble ancestors. A few minutes later the councilor himself joined them.

"I am Councilor Rukh of the Inner Council," he announced. "Please be brief. I must go and inspect my gate and my section of the wall."

To their surprise, Rukh was dressed in armor: a half-suit consisting of a breastplate with dependent thigh pieces and knee cops, pauldrons, and rerebraces to the elbows. His mask, instead of the usual silk or velvet, was made of metal. All of the armor was lavishly embossed and gilded. To experienced eyes it was no more than costume armor, the metal so thin it would crumple at the first blow of a real weapon. Presumably, should a battle come, he would don a field harness.

"By your leave, my lord, we are under no time restrictions save those set by Kyaga," Nistur reminded him.

"Do not speak nonsense. The defense of this city is more important than the peevish sulking of some filthy barbarian. Ask your questions."

"My lord," Nistur began, "did you have dealings with the nomad ambassador named Yalmuk Bloodarrow?"

"I did. Besides the formal audiences and banquets, I entertained him here in my home, along with two other

prominent chieftains: Guklak and Shatterspear. My servants are still trying to get the smell out of the cushions."

"Did you approach these chieftains in any way with offers of bribery, coercion, or any other subornation of treason?"

"Of course I did! What do you think diplomacy is all about?"

"Not my field of expertise, I'm afraid," Nistur said. "But all of these things are frequent cause for murder. Had you any vociferous dispute with Yalmuk?"

"None beyond the usual disagreements over the merits of our respective nations." With a gloved hand, the councilor brushed at a fancied smudge on a gleaming pauldron.

"How did he impress you?" Ironwood asked. "As to his loyalty, I mean."

"He was resentful of Kyaga's sudden rise among the nomads and made little secret of the fact. Overall, though, I found him loyal. I think my offers of wealth and honors had little effect on him because he felt he would soon have those things anyway. He was full of confidence that Kyaga would be victorious. Speaking of which, I must see to it that this conquest does not take place, so if you will now excuse me..."

"Just a moment more," Nistur said, holding up a hand. "What were your dealings with the other two?"

"My dealings were the same with all," he said impatiently.

"Guklak rebuffed me out of hand. It seemed that his loyalty was unshakable. Shatterspear is a corrupt fool and seemed much more interested than the others, but he has not contacted me. I suspect Yalmuk's killing has put him on his guard. Now, will that be all?"

"For the moment," Nistur said.

"Excellent." Councilor Rukh began to stride toward the door, and a servant cast a black velvet cloak across his armored shoulders. "Good fortune in finding your killer." He paused and turned. "If I were you, I'd start with the man whose seal you wear. My steward will show you out."

"Another faithful servant of the crown," sighed Nistur when

they were out on the street.

"He's an odd one," Ironwood said. "I was surprised you didn't want to question him further."

"We would have got absolutely nothing from him except for the little suspicion he tried to plant. He is a schemer of iron purpose, like the lord himself. Besides ..." His voice trailed off in a bemused silence.

"Besides what?" Ironwood asked.

"I think he may have been the one who hired me to kill you."

The next name on the list was Councilor Melkar, but as they wended their way toward his house, a liveried servant ran up to them.

"Gentlemen, I serve the great Councilor Alban, and he urgently desires your presence at his mansion."

"He's far down the list," Nistur told the others. "I suspect the lord doesn't consider him much of a threat. But it would be agreeable to talk to someone who actually desires to talk to us."

"I agree," Ironwood said. He turned to Shellring. "This one is supposed to be the richest of the lot, but don't steal anything while we are there."

She shrugged. "What these people own is mostly too big to carry, anyway."

They followed the servant to a town house flanked by other similarly lavish homes. Whatever this one's wealth, he did not choose to spend it on fine grounds. The servant opened the door and conducted them through a house full of bizarre sculptures, paintings, anatomical specimens, skeletons, charts of land and sky, and instruments of no discernible function.

"It's like Stunbog's cabin, only a hundred times as big and crowded!" Shellring said wonderingly. They ascended a stair carved in the likeness of a coiled dragon, every scale rendered with loving care and unsurpassable craftsmanship. Finally they reached a room on the third floor, and the servant knocked. From the panels of the door, a variety of

strange beasts frowned at them.

"Enter," someone called.

They passed into a room impossibly cluttered with magical tomes, instruments, specimens, and apparatus. There were also some five or six men and women there, all dressed in robes spangled with magical symbols. They were gathered at a long central table, bent over scrolls and charts like a general's staff planning a campaign over maps of enemy territory. At one end of the table sat a small, elderly man who looked up at their approach.

"Are you the investigating officers?" he demanded. They held up their seals, and he beckoned them closer.

"Come here, then. You are not what I expected." The old man had pushed his formal mask onto the top of his head where it rested, apparently forgotten.

"I am sorry we disappoint you," said Nistur, long since inured to snubs.

"No, no. I expected far worse, some court toady or blundering constable. You look as if you might know your work."

"We flatter ourselves that we have done well so far," Nistur said.

"Well, you may not do so well in the future without help. Look at this." He swept an arm over the table. By the light of lamps wrought in the form of fire-breathing dragons, they saw charts upon which stars and constellations were connected by straight lines and arcs, parchments covered with arcane writing and symbols, or across which liquids had been splashed, seemingly at random. There were metallic charms of various sorts, along with crystals, bones, and feathers. Scarcely a square inch of tabletop was visible.

"Hmm, I see," said Nistur. "If I may crave your indulgence, Councilor Alban, what are we looking at?"

"Why, this is proof of my greatest fears, fears that the lord has laughed at and considered to be unfounded! It is proof that Kyaga Strongbow is possessed of great sorcer-ous

power!"

"One ignores such evidence at great peril," Nistur agreed.

"Do your studies and your advisors inform you of the nature of this power?"

"It is most strange," said Alban. "All the indications are that Kyaga arrived here with a talisman of great potency, one that lends him abilities denied to most humans."

"I see. Does your research reveal any connection between this talisman and, say, the death of Yalmuk Bloodarrow?" He had decided it was worth a try.

Alban waved a hand dismissively. "That is a matter too petty for my deliberations."

"Nonetheless, we are charged with investigating his murder. Did you, along with the other councilors, entertain the nomadic envoys?"

"Yes, but there was only one who interested me."

"Shadespeaker," Ironwood said.

"Yes. The tribal wizard intrigued me." Alban picked up a handful of glittering crystals and let them trickle between his fingers. Somehow, they arranged themselves on the table in the semblance of a five-pointed star. "In their ignorant fashion, these primitive shamans are sometimes privy to secrets of distinct power."

"I believe my lord exaggerates," said a white-haired sorcerer who wore a tall, pointed hat of gray silk. "The shamans do little except communicate with a limited range of tribal spirits, and they profess to speak with the voices of dead ancestors. Even these petty skills are for the most part fraudulent. Barbarians as a whole dislike and distrust the Arts. They have little use for genuine sorcerers."

"I disagree!" cried a very fat woman who wore a moon-spangled black gown the size of a nomad's tent. "I have consulted with shamans of the wasteland who had at their command fiends of vast power. Their practice is strange to us, but that is because it is passed down by word of mouth, and nothing is written."

"But that is not this one," said a tiny man whose face was as wrinkled as a dried apple. "If Shadespeaker possesses great wizardry power, then he must also possess a spell or talisman that masks it!"

"And yet," said Councilor Alban, instantly silencing their bickering, "our spells of seeking have determined that the enigmatic relationship between Shadespeaker and Kyaga is in some strange fashion linked with the warlord's power."

"We learned from the barbarians that Shadespeaker traveled among them as a prophet, foretelling the coming of Kyaga," said Nistur. Ironwood and Shelling looked on with expressions of distaste. Apparently, neither of them had much use for sorcerous doings. Nistur, on the other hand, was interested in anything that might aid their task.

"Yes, and it was most strange," Alban said. "I could not persuade the man to elucidate it to me. Apparently, it is the custom for shamans to communicate with the spirits in an ecstatic trance. It is most unlike them to walk about in a seemingly ordinary state of consciousness, proclaiming words of prophecy as they travel."

"Why didn't it make the nomads suspicious of him?" Ironwood asked.

"It did," answered the aristocrat. "But, as I have told you, Kyaga and Shadespeaker possess some mysterious power, and it is this that turns aside the natural suspicions of the barbarians and makes them lay aside ancient enmities to fight in his cause."

"Not with perfect efficiency," Nistur assured him. "There is much resentment of Kyaga among the chieftains, and their feuds are ever ready to resurface."

"If he had the power to control people utterly," said the wizened wizard, "he would not need a conquering army at all. He could rule all Ansalon through sorcerous power alone."

"An excellent point," Nistur conceded.

"No," said Alban, "this talisman gives him an advantage, no

more. But he has parlayed this advantage to become a genuine power in the world."

"What does this signify?" Ironwood demanded. "If you have nothing save questions and conundrums, this is of very little help to us."

"Who said that I should be of use to you?" Alban demanded.

"It is you who should be of use to Tarsis! Our enemy is Kyaga Strongbow, and we must know the source of his strength!"

"Your pardon, sir," said Nistur, "but we have not been retained for purposes of military intelligence. The lord of this city wishes us to solve Yalmuk Bloodarrow's murder. Having done so, we will perhaps have removed Kyaga's pretext for hostilities, or at the very least we shall have bought Tarsis a little time to strengthen its defenses."

"Nonsense!" Alban snapped. "He is a warlord with a plan for conquest. Do you really think he will alter his schedule to his disadvantage for the sake of this trifling homicide?"

"It seems unlikely," Nistur admitted, "but our orders are to proceed upon that assumption."

"Have you spoken with Kyaga and Shadespeaker?" Alban asked, his mercurial mind apparently now working in another direction.

"We have," Nistur said.

"Describe this to me."

"My lord," Ironwood said, "our orders are to report to the Lord of Tarsis, not to you."

"Peace, my friend," said Nistur, "this will not take long, and it may yield results."

While Nistur rendered a brief description of their interviews in the barbarian camp earlier that day, Alban's coterie of wizards went over the three investigators as if searching for interpretable signs, although they did this in ways that were completely incomprehensible. A very tall, thin man who wore layers of gauzy black cloth sprinkled them with glittering powders, muttering to himself as the powders changed color. The fat woman squinted at them

through a lens of purple crystal that she held before her left eye while the fingers of her right hand traced complicated symbols in the air. Shellring drew back a little as the woman seemed to peer up her nostrils. The wizened old man touched their garments with an instrument consisting of ivory arcs connected with golden struts and engraved all over with groups of tiny dots.

When Nistur's tale was concluded, the assembled sorcerers huddled around Councilor Alban, and there were several minutes of collective muttering, interspersed with gestures that apparently had some sort of mystical meaning. Eventually, Alban addressed the investigators.

"It is even worse than we had feared. Your interview with Kyaga and the shaman left traces on the three of you indicating that you have been in the presence of terrible power and what might be termed, in layman's language, 'spells of deception.' However, the exact nature of the talisman itself is not yet clear. Because of the phase of the moons and the alignment of certain baleful stars, we will need the rest of the night, the coming day, and perhaps half of the following night to interpret the evidence."

"You had better make that the entirety of tomorrow night, Councilor Alban," said the tiny wizard.

"We shall look forward to the results of your studies," Nistur said.

"Yes, I'll dispatch the news to you as soon as we have it." He was already poring over a star chart and reaching for a quill and ink. "Run along now."

With this dismissal, they took their leave. Back on the street outside, Shellring ran a hand over her bristly scalp. "Is that old coot as crazy as he sounds?"

"I fear so," said Nistur. "But that alone does not mean he isn't onto something. From the first, I have felt there is too much magic involved in what should have been a simple killing. It annoys me when people complicate things needlessly."

"What do you make of his little pack of wizards?" Iron-wood asked him.

"Wizards! These are amateur practitioners, my friend, little better than the mountebanks who entertain the gullible at country fairs. They wear none of the insignia of the great Orders of Magic, nor the robes of the Orders. It does not mean they utterly lack knowledge or ability, but they lack the discipline to master that difficult and dangerous Art. The world is full of would-be mages, I fear, folk who have read a few books, perhaps learned a handful of spells, and think that is all there is to being a wizard."

Ironwood smiled ruefully. "Like the village braggarts who strut about in armor, draped with weapons during peacetime, but who are never to be found when the war trumpets blow."

"Exactly. It may be that, with their minor abilities and eccentric talents, they have discovered something important, but how are we to know?"

"So do we go to Councilor Melkar's now?" Shellring asked, yawning.

Ironwood studied the paper the lord had given them. "It says here he's on duty at the fort until the third gong of the night, which is rung an hour before dawn." He rerolled the paper and stuffed it into his belt pouch. "Karst says Melkar is the one councilor who takes his soldiering seriously, so he's probably at the fort or out

inspecting the walls. Shall we look for him or wait until he returns home?"

Nistur dusted snow from his hat brim. "We could spend the whole time chasing him down. I recommend we go to the hulk, get warm, have a snack, and see if Stunbog has made any headway in his studies. Then we can return to the hunt refreshed."

"You may be refreshed," Shellring said, yawning once more, "but I'm going to need a nap before I feel like doing any hunting."

They returned to the hulk to find an unexpected sight: tethered to one of the supporting beams that kept the vessel upright was a horse. They examined the beast with some wonder. It was a shaggy creature, its mane and tail untrimmed, its hooves unshod in the fashion of the nomads. Its saddle, bridle, and other gear were likewise of nomad style.

"A visitor?" Nistur said.

"Probably some barbarian with a sore toe," Ironwood said. They went inside and climbed the steps to the large cabin. There they found Stunbog seated as they had left him, having apparently progressed about one-fifth of the way through his weighty book of sigils. In a corner of the cabin they were astonished to see Myrsa deep in conversation with a young barbarian whose hair was the same color as her own. The two seemed completely oblivious to the new arrivals. Shellring stared at the young barbarian with her mouth slightly agape.

Nistur looked at Stunbog, raised his eyebrows, and inclined his head toward the pair in an eloquent gesture of inquiry.

"He is her brother," Stunbog whispered. Nistur and Ironwood joined him at the table. Shellring continued to stare.

"I thought she was alone in this world," Nistur whispered back.

"Until two hours ago she thought she was. He was a child when she last saw him, and she thought him killed in the same attack that saw her mother slain. It seems the boy was sold to a band of plains nomads and, in time, was adopted by the family that bought him. He is now with the army of Kyaga." He looked fondly at the two. Every few seconds, Myrsa touched or patted the young man, as if to reassure herself he was real.

"How did he know she was here?" Ironwood asked, suspiciously. "He could be a spy sent by Kyaga."

"Any fool can see they're brother and sister," Nistur said.

"Yes," Stunbog said, "there's no doubt of it. He says that,

about two years ago, a small band of nomad horse traders lodged with his adoptive tribe. They had recently come from Tarsis, where I had treated a number of them for the black-spotted fever. The traders told the nomads of the healer and his unusual assistant, and several of them remarked that this young man resembled her amazingly. Because of their mixed heritage, their particular combination of features and coloration are quite rare among the barbarians. Since then the young man has longed to visit Tarsis, and his tribe joined the nomad host just today. He wasted no time in seeking me out."

Nistur brushed away a tear. "This is most touching. Indeed, it is worthy of a few verses." He reached for a quill and parchment.

Myrsa stood and approached them, her arm tightly around the younger barbarian's shoulders. "This is Badar, my true brother. I thought him dead, but he is returned to me." Tears streaked her severe features, and her eyes were red.

"I... pleased to meet my sister's friends." Clearly, the young man was not used to speaking the local language, and his accent was even heavier than his sister's.

Although he was clearly younger by a few years, he might otherwise have been Myrsa's twin. Like her he wore skin clothing, although the cut and embroidery of his garments were those of a different tribe.

"I am Nistur the poet," said the ex-assassin, offering his hand, "and this is Ironwood the mercenary and this—"

"I'm Sh-Sh-Shellring," said the thief, her voice so hesitant that for a moment Nistur thought she might be choking. Then his eyes narrowed with wonder. In the uncertain light from the hearth and candles he could not be certain, but she seemed to be blushing! Another wonder to add to those he had recently experienced.

The young barbarian took each hand in turn, solemnly. "You have fought shoulder to shoulder with my sister," he said slowly. "My sword is at your service."

"And very honored we are," Nistur assured him. "But we do not wish to interrupt your reunion. Please continue and pay us no heed while we confer with Stunbog. There will be ample time to socialize later on." Smiling, the two retired to their corner and resumed their quiet conversation.

"Any luck with the sigil?" Ironwood asked.

"I have pursued a number of leads," Stunbog said, perplexed, "but I have been able to find nothing like it among the protective sigils."

"We have just had a most unusual interview," Nistur said, and proceeded to tell the healer about the events in the bizarre mansion of Councilor Alban.

At the end of it Stunbog chuckled. "I know most of those wizards. None belong to the Orders of Magic, although they are not total frauds. All of them have certain skills. Alban is a notorious amateur and dabbler. He is intelligent, but he lacks the mental discipline to be a genuine wizard, so he hires second-rate sorcerers to keep him company instead. But if they can set aside their squabbling, they may be able to come up with something.

One thing Alban said intrigues me, though."

"What might that be?" Nistur asked.

"He mentioned a spell of deception, you say?"

"Yes, although he said this was a layman's term."

"Certainly. As you may know, sorcerers have a number of specialized languages. I wish he had given you the true name of the spell, although it probably would have been futile. Since you are not trained to the languages of the Arts, the syllables would not have registered themselves upon your memory."

"What does it signify?" Ironwood asked.

"Perhaps nothing. But, while I can find no protective sigil like the one you saw on the hands of Shadespeaker, I have found some with similar designs on what might be termed spells of changing, and some of these might also be termed spells of deception."

"Could such a spell have allowed the shaman to deceive the fiend?" Nistur asked.

"I do not see how," Stunbog admitted. "Truth-fiends are believed to be proof against any spell of deception. But it might have another purpose." He turned a page and pointed to a design. "Shellring, does this look like the sigil you saw on the shaman's hand?" He received no response. "Shellring?"

She had been gazing at the two in the corner. Abruptly, her head jerked around. "What?" Stunbog repeated the question. "Oh, well, I don't know. I . . ." She trailed off, then pointed to one side of the design. "No, it's close, but the one I saw didn't have these little curlicues over here on the right." She leaned back, and slowly, as if under control of a will not her own, her head turned again, to face the pair in the corner.

The other three looked at her for a while, then at the young barbarian, then at each other. Then they shrugged simultaneously.

"Well," said Nistur, "we must have a bite to eat, a warming tankard, and then we must be off. Melkar is probably on his way homeward even now."

"You two go on," said Shellring. "I think I'll just stay here. I need some sleep."

"Yes," said Nistur, "by all means, have a nap. We can find Melkar's mansion on our own." She did not bother to answer. Once outside the hulk, fed and warmed, Ironwood turned to Nistur and grinned. "Who would have believed our little guttersnipe could be smitten? And by a barbarian at that!"

"The ways of the heart are ever mysterious," sighed Nistur as he pulled on his gloves. "Even a hardened thief like Shellring is not immune to its vagaries. Badar and she are about of an age, I judge, and he is a most prepossessing young man. You saw how he wrung tears from the stony Myrsa. Perhaps he is one of those destined to melt the hearts of the hardest women."

"Perhaps you are too much of a poet," Ironwood said, making tracks in the snow.

After questioning a few tavern keepers and asking directions of the night watch, they found themselves at length in a district of the town not far from the North Gate. This was another area much damaged by the Cataclysm, where the wealthy had taken advantage of the devastation to provide themselves with spacious estates in the otherwise cramped city.

"It must be around here somewhere," Ironwood said, peering through the falling snow. "That watchman said it is the one with gate pillars of green marble, but who can see color in this weather?" The diffuse moonlight gave little clarity to the scene.

"That watchman was half drunk," Nistur said. "A moment, maybe it is that one."

He pointed to a low wall interrupted by a pair of tall pillars flanking an iron gate. Spanning the pillars was a high-arched lintel of wrought iron, fancifully worked to represent a pair of stags standing on their hind legs, supporting a globe with their forehooves. Doubtless a family symbol, Nistur thought. Below the arch dangled something, perhaps a lantern.

"It must be," Ironwood said. "Come on." They walked to the gate; then they paused beneath it, astonished.

"Councilor Melkar has an odd taste in decoration," Nistur said. "Unless my eyes deceive me, that is a hanged man."

Ironwood shrugged his armored shoulders. "Maybe it's a servant who displeased him. The Tarsian aristocrats are a whimsical lot."

"Nothing so simple, I'm afraid," said Nistur. "Notice, for instance, the barbarian clothing."

They watched in suspense as the cold wind caused the corpse to turn. Then they saw its face.

"Well, well," Nistur said, aghast. "Here's someone we know."

"Aye," said Ironwood, choking slightly. "Although he's not

looking his best just now."

Leering down at them, his head at an unnatural angle, was Guklak Horsetamer, chieftain of the Great Ice River nomads.

Chapter Cen

"This presents a problem," said the Lord of Tarsis. "It is most convenient that you have discovered the murderer, well within the deadline set by Kyaga Strongbow, but it is unsettling that it should be Councilor Melkar. He is the only capable soldier on my Inner Council. Any of the others would have been more acceptable." He glared at Ironwood and Nistur as if they had failed him personally.

"Surely," Nistur said, "you can't believe that Melkar himself killed Guklak."

"The body was found hanging from the gate of his mansion," said the lord.

"You might as well suspect Abushmulum the Ninth of killing Yalmuk," Ironwood said. "After all, the body was discovered on the base of his statue."

"Councilor Melkar was at his duty post until the third gong of night," Nistur pointed out. "We found the body within minutes of the time he turned his post over to a subordinate. He scarcely had time to perform the deed, even if he felt like hanging the fellow from his own gate."

"I must point out," said the lord, "that a great noble of Tarsis is not without servants. In Melkar's case, these include a large number of the soldiers he leads and his personal guard. These would be more than willing to exterminate someone like Guklak and provide their master with an unshakable alibi at the same time."

"But why Guklak?" Ironwood asked. "And how did he get into the city?"

"The walls of Tarsis are far too penetrable," said the lord.

"Besides the repair work that even now progresses, I have decided to take extraordinary measures to improve our security. When I received word of the latest murder, I issued orders to round up malcontents, subversive elements, and

suspicious foreigners. They are being arrested and incarcerated even now."

"I strongly doubt these measures will increase security to any measurable extent," Nistur said, "nor is it likely to allay the inevitable anger of Kyaga Strongbow."

"Nonetheless, the Lord of Tarsis must be seen to be taking firm measures. It will impress the citizenry with the seriousness of the situation. In statesmanship, perception is as important as reality."

"I see," Nistur replied dubiously.

"Has Kyaga been informed about Guklak Horsetamer yet?" Ironwood asked.

The lord grimaced. "I expect to know momentarily. This time there was no throng of idlers to bear the tale, but the man seems to have abundant sources of information within the walls. I doubt my sweep will have nabbed them all."

"Your own mercenaries are the most likely source," Nistur told him. "I must apologize to my friend here, but not all of his professional brethren share his high principles and unshakable sense of honor."

"You'll get no argument from me there," Ironwood admitted.

"Some of the soldiers you hired are utter scum. If there's a bent copper to be made from relaying vital information to the camp outside, they'll be all too happy to pass it on."

"I am surrounded by treason at every level," the lord sighed.

"But that is the sad lot of the ruler."

"What is your decision, my lord?" Nistur asked, fiddling with the feathers in his broad hat. "We must have our orders."

"Very well. You may continue your investigation. I have Councilor Melkar under house arrest in his mansion. If you cannot turn up a better suspect by Kyaga's deadline, I will hand him over to the barbarian. You are dismissed."

They bowed their way from the lord's chamber and made their way outside. "What sort of sovereign hands over one of his most capable vassals to an enemy, no matter how many barbarians he may have murdered?" Ironwood asked.

"One who is both crafty and insecure," Nistur answered, redonning his hat to protect his bald pate from the falling snow. "A ruler is always suspicious of his strongest, most cunning subordinates. On the Inner Council, that means the lords Rukh and Melkar. The lord would have preferred Rukh, but this may very well be a convenient way to get rid of a potential rival."

"Even though the man has never dealt him ill?" Iron-wood said, scandalized.

"I fear so. If Melkar is honest as well as brave, he may very well have a loyal following among the members of the Great Council, and those followers might want to see their hero enthroned as Lord of Tarsis. Many a fine general has paid for popularity and acclaim with his head."

"I am sick of this wretched place!" cried Ironwood. "I want to be away from here. There is treachery in every corner and, if men do not smile, it is because they would not reveal that they have fangs instead of teeth!"

"Why, that is an excellent poetic metaphor," Nistur said, astonished. "I would not have thought you so gifted. You should—" He broke off as he saw someone rushing at them through the falling snow. "Isn't that Shellring? And it doesn't look as if she bears good news."

"Nistur! Ironwood!" the girl gasped as she came to a skidding halt in front of them. "They've taken Stunbog to the prison! And they took Myrsa and her brother, too! Come on, we've got to get them out!" She began tugging the two of them in the direction of the Hall of Justice, and so great was her urgent desperation that she actually succeeded in moving them several paces.

"A moment," Nistur said, disengaging himself. "Before we do anything, we must know what has happened."

"Aye," Ironwood said. "There is no rush. We know from experience that one thing people in jail have plenty of is time. Give us the story."

"It was just at sunup. Stunbog was still at that book, and

Myrsa and her brother were still talking, and I'd just nodded off, when there was a pounding at the door below. Myrsa went to answer the door the way she usually does, and we heard a lot of shouting. Then Badar was down the steps with his sword out, and the next thing I knew the place was full of watchmen and mercenaries, with Constable Weite strutting around and ordering them to put irons on everybody. He would've arrested me, but this seal is still good for something, at least." She gasped, having related all this in a single breath.

Ironwood bit off a curse. "It's the lord's sweep! I should've expected it!"

"What was the charge?" Nistur asked.

"Trafficking with the enemy, Weite said, because Stunbog's a foreigner and Myrsa's a barbarian and they were meeting with a man from Kyaga's army. I tried to explain, but they didn't want to listen!"

"That was predictable," Nistur sighed. "Oh, very well, let's go see if we can straighten things out."

A few minutes of walking brought them to the little plaza before the Hall of Justice, where a great many watchmen were gathered and a temporary holding pen had been set up to contain the crowd of wretches swept up in the lord's dragnet. Most of them were bewildered foreigners, some were citizens of a villainous cast, and others looked insane but harmless. Clearly, the arresting officers were showing little discrimination. Flashing their seals in all directions, the three pushed their way toward the entrance.

"No, I can't let you in!" cried the guard in charge of the door.

"The lord's orders are most specific. While we are processing the prisoners, there are to be no intrusions or visits."

Ironwood held his seal before the man's eyes. "Here is the lord's own seal, which permits us entry everywhere!"

The man shook his head, scattering snow from his hat. "Not this time! For this operation, all lesser judicial powers are suspended by order of the Lord of Tarsis and enforced by

Councilor Rukh, who has been placed in charge of the Hall of Justice for the duration."

"There is nothing so grand as the power of a petty official," Nistur muttered as they turned away.

"And we'll do no good by applying to Councilor Rukh," Ironwood added. "He resents our authority as it is. He'd be just as happy to clap us in irons."

"I've been scanning this crowd," Shellring said, "and our friends aren't there. They must already be in the cells."

"Well, nothing to be done about it now," Nistur said. "In a few days we may be in a position to get them out."

"Or else Kyaga will have destroyed the city," Ironwood said. "In which case it won't matter."

"You two give up too easily," Shellring said with disgust. "Here, give me some money."

Mystified, Nistur handed over a few coins. Shellring went to one of the watchmen who supervised the crowd of arrestees and whispered in his ear as she slipped some of the money into his belt purse. Moments later, the man left his place in the cordon and passed into the Hall of Justice. After a brief wait, he reemerged from the building and said something to Shellring. She nodded and returned to the other two. Her expression was unwontedly serious.

"What have you learned?" Nistur asked her.

"They're on the lowest level, but that's just because they were some of the first brought in. The sweep started in the old harbor. The cells down there are small, and they're shaped sort of like beehives: round, with ceilings that slope in like a cone and a circular door in the top. The prisoners are sent down a ladder, and the ladder's drawn up. No need for a door and a lock that way."

"It sounds grim," Nistur said, shaking his head.

"It's that, all right," she affirmed. "It's cold and cramped and dark. But I think it may give us an opportunity to get them out."

"It sounds just the opposite to me," Nistur said.

"Aye," said Ironwood. "If they're that far down, nothing short of the lord's pardon or Kyaga taking the city will get them out."

"I never would've thought you two would give up so easily," she said.

"Perhaps we lack your resources," Nistur said. "What is your plan?"

"Can the two of you follow my lead for a change?" she asked.

"I'd like to see the old man out of there," Ironwood said, "but we've precious little time to find our killer." "And you were getting close?" she said sarcastically.

"I admit we were not," Nistur said.

"Well, when they were dragging Stunbog off, he told me to find you and tell you that he'd figured out what that sigil was."

"Let's do as she says," Ironwood advised. "We're accomplishing nothing on our own."

"Very well," Nistur agreed, doffing his hat and dusting snow from its brim. "Where are we going?"

She took a deep breath. "I'm going to show you some of my part of the city, the places even the lord and all his spies don't know about."

* * * * *

The Lord of Tarsis was too preoccupied with unfolding events to think about what his investigators might be up to. The captain of the East Gate had sent word to the palace: Kyaga Strongbow was before the gate, demanding to see the lord at once.

Cursing and administering kicks and slaps as inducements to his servants, the lord was dressed in his finest ceremonial armor, a suit of cunningly jointed plate lavishly overlaid with gold and silver, with jewels set along the edges of the plates and rare feathers bepluming the helmet. An immense cloak of silk trimmed with ermine was fastened to the shoulder plates, and the lord was boosted into the saddle of his finest parade horse.

Runners both preceded and trooped alongside the mounted lord, keeping the common rabble well away from him and holding the long cloak clear of the filthy street. At the gate the lord dismounted and climbed the steps. Despite the precious metals, his parade armor was far lighter than his field harness, but ascending the stair was still hard going. Behind him the grooms managed his cape, which he was beginning to regret having worn. It added to his majesty, yet under these circumstances, it was faintly ridiculous.

When he stood at last above the gate and saw Kyaga below, he decided he should have adopted a more warlike appearance. The leader of the nomads was this day dressed all in black, down to his gloved fingertips. Over his tunic he wore a shirt of black chain mail, and his horse wore a plain harness of black leather supporting its master's weapons. Kyaga looked like a chieftain preparing to lead his army to war.

"I have come at your request, rude as it was," the lord began. "What would you have of me?"

Kyaga pointed an accusing finger. "I have every cause to demand your head, Lord of Tarsis!"

"But you would have to take my city to get it," the lord replied.

"And I shall, if you do not satisfy me immediately. Another of my chiefs has been murdered in Tarsis! I want his murderer surrendered to me!"

The lord sighed quietly. He'd had no real hope that word of Guklak's death could be withheld from Kyaga. "And how did your chieftain happen to be within the walls of Tarsis, Kyaga Strongbow? Did I come out to your camp, through your sentries, and abduct him? Or did he perhaps enter Tarsis by stealth to treat with someone here, perhaps someone who has neither your interests, nor mine, at heart?"

"It is that question alone that restrains me from ordering an immediate attack on your city! But I will tell you this: my

patience has worn thin. Deliver to me the killers of Yalmuk and Guklak by sunrise tomorrow! You, Lord of Tarsis, must bring them personally to my tent and surrender them to me, for I will accept no lackey of yours!"

"You must take me for an imbecile, Kyaga Strongbow," the lord answered. "This is clearly a ruse to trick me into your camp, where you may kill me or seize me for ransom. Many a general has been thus deceived, and I will not follow their example."

"I come before you personally to make this demand, riding within easy shot of your walls, for this is the nomad way! I swear by the spirits of my ancestors that you will not be harmed or detained if you come before me to hand over the killers. No warrior of this host will ever follow me again should I break this oath."

The Lord of Tarsis paused, suspecting a more subtle trap.

"It is true, my lord," said Captain Karst, who stood nearby.

"No nomad will tolerate the breaking of such an oath. If made by a chief, it would dishonor the whole people."

"Very well," said the lord. "Tomorrow, upon the rising of the sun, you will have the killers."

"See to it," said Kyaga. "I will have the killers, or I will have war!" He whirled his mount and galloped back toward his tent. His army raised a ferocious shout at his passing.

"I hope you can satisfy him, my lord," said Captain Karst.

"The preparations are far from complete. We need another ten days at least to get the walls in proper order. A month would be far better. Your amateur defenders are in dire need of drilling."

"Oh, I think I can satisfy him at dawn," said the lord. "After that, it will be back to negotiation. I can easily buy us another month that way. And perhaps it will not come to war at all."

Karst bowed. "As my lord says." He frowned after the silk- and ermine-clad back as his employer walked toward the stairs. Karst knew all too well what the lord meant: barring

the appearance of a better suspect, tomorrow he would turn over Councilor Melkar to Kyaga's tender ministrations. And Melkar was the only member of the Inner Council who had both the authority and the experience to coordinate the defense of the city.

Karst found he had much to ponder. He had always served his paymaster loyally, but there was a limit to the folly that a sensible soldier should put up with. He decided to consult with his fellow officers. It might be a good time to contemplate a retreat from this ill-starred city.

"I trust you are not taking us to meet another of Granny Toadflower's ilk," Nistur muttered.

The three were back in the Old City, in an area of tottering buildings that leaned alarmingly toward one another across narrow streets.

"Not exactly," she said. At a crossroads, she halted. At its center was one of the storm drains with the customary grated cover. She knelt by it and examined the grate. Then she thrust a fine-boned hand through one of the square holes and felt around. There was a clank as she pulled on something, then withdrew her hand. "Grab it on this side," she instructed, "and pull up on it. I can't do it by myself." |

Mystified, the other two crouched and laid their hands ^ to the cold metal. With a muscle-straining heave, they raised the grate on a pair of heavy internal hinges until it was in an upright position.

"How fascinating," Nistur mused, peering into the j darkness below. "Another part of this city we have not yet ; explored, a part perhaps even more repellent than that with which we are already acquainted."

"It doesn't have to be pretty," Ironwood retorted, "as long as it gets us someplace. Shellring, I take it you have some sort of plan."

"I do. Just follow me." Nimble, she dropped into the hole, and they followed. "There's a ladder here," she said as she

disappeared. "The last one down close the grate. Just give it a tug and let it fall. It'll close slowly."

Ironwood was next down, followed closely by Nistur. As instructed, he tugged at the grate, then ducked his head down lest the weighty thing fall precipitately. But, as Shellring had predicted, it dropped slowly and settled into place, making very little noise. He continued down the ladder, which seemed to be inordinately long. The darkness was profound.

"You should have mentioned that we would need torches or lanterns," he chided, his voice echoing as if in a long tunnel.

"We won't need them," she said, her voice sounding as if it came from the bottom of a well. The descent continued until Nistur's arms and legs ached; then he found himself hanging from the bottom rung.

"Just drop," Shellring advised him.

"That calls for an act of faith," Nistur said. Someone yanked his belt, and he yelped as he fell. The drop was no more than six inches.

"If you were a little taller you wouldn't have had such a fright," Ironwood said.

"I was not frightened," he said with offended dignity. "It is just that altitude is not a thing I like to accept on faith in conditions of utter darkness."

"It's not quite dark," Ironwood told him.

Nistur looked around and realized he could just make out the forms of his companions, although he could as yet make out little detail of his surroundings.

"Your eyes will get used to it in a little while. And there's more light where we're going," Shellring assured him.

"What is the source of the light?" Nistur asked.

"I'm not sure," she said. "Some of it's from mushrooms that glow in the dark. I think there's glowing rock, too."

Carefully, Nistur stepped to a nearby wall and scrutinized it from a few inches away. Embedded in it were flecks that glowed a dull blue-green. He scratched at it, but his nails

found only hard surface. "Yes, this is a luminous mineral. How intriguing."

"Let's go," Shellring urged. "You can see well enough now not to stumble."

She led them along a low, circular tunnel that angled slightly downward. The air was damp but not stale, and they could feel a constant, slight motion to it, as if the air were being circulated by some means. Though cool, it was noticeably warmer than at street level.

They came into a large room where the light was brighter. From the ceiling sprouted a profusion of mushrooms that glowed in various shades of blue and green. The light was still dim, but it seemed bright after what they had come through. A number of side tunnels met at the room, and above each tunnel mouth was a niche containing a statue. The light was not sufficient to reveal the appearance of the statues, save that they were squat and primitive-looking.

"Let's see," Shellring said, "which one was it?" \

"Surely you haven't brought us all the way down here | without a clear notion of where we are going!" Nistur snapped, slightly unnerved by their spooky surroundings.

"It's been a while," she said. "Just be patient. I think it's that one." She pointed at a square-sided tunnel and set off along it. Lacking any credible recourse, the others followed.

The tunnel branched more than once, but Shellring now seemed positive in her sense of direction. After a few minutes of travel, she stopped at a spot that seemed to be like every other place in the tunnel. "This is it," she announced.

"This is what?" Ironwood asked, looking all around him. The faint, diffuse glow was unremarkable, except for a patch on one side from which no glow came. Shellring reached into this patch, and there came the unmistakable sound of knuckles rapping on wood.

"A door?" said Nistur. He was answered moments later when a shuffling sound announced the arrival of someone on the

other side. With a creak, a round patch of light replaced the blank spot on the tunnel wall. From beyond came a light no brighter than that cast by two or three candles, but after the gloom they had come through, it seemed bright. In the light stood a dwarf with pure white hair and beard.

"Who is it?" the dwarf inquired. "Oh, Shellring. But who are these two?"

Nistur doffed his hat. "I believe we met briefly a few evenings ago in Stunbog's ship. I am Nistur, and this is my companion Ironwood, who was indisposed that night."

"Delver, Stunbog is in trouble," Shellring said. "I think you and your people can help him."

The dwarf peered at them not so much in suspicion as in puzzlement, as if he were not accustomed to intrusions into his placid life.

"Well, come in, then. If Stunbog needs help, we want to do what we can for him. Half the children would have died these last two years, had it not been for him."

The others passed within. Ironwood and Nistur had to stoop slightly, and they stood close together of necessity, for the room was dwarf-scaled.

Quickly, Shellring related an abbreviated version of recent events, culminating with the arrest and incarceration of Stunbog, Myrsa, and Badar. The dwarf listened attentively, nodding from time to time.

"We've heard of some of this," he said. "We get around, you know, but we try to stay out of doings aboveground. They've all but forgotten us up there, and that's the way we like it. But to help Stunbog, I think we can do something."

"Wonderful!" Shellring said. "How do we do it?"

"Well, for starters, it won't be easy or simple."

"Oh," she said, crestfallen. "I thought we could just go up there and bust them out."

"Not in that part of the city. Some of the old tunnels are blocked up. It will call for some digging. And there's ... Well, let's go consult with the gathering, and we'll learn what the

situation is. There's a danger, you see, and it might make things difficult, even impossible."

"A danger?" Nistur said. "What might it be?"

"The behir," Delver answered. "But, no sense borrowing trouble beforetime. There are folk who know the situation in that part of town better than I do. Come along." The dwarf crossed the little room into another, and they followed. Part of his dwelling seemed to be a stonecutter's workshop, with tools neatly racked and a number of apparent works in progress standing about on pedestals.

From the dwelling they passed into a corridor far larger than the ones they had traversed earlier. This one had a vaulted ceiling from which were suspended iron baskets full of luminous fungi, casting a light at least equal to that within the dwelling. At one point Delver stopped and opened a small door. It gave admittance into a closet that was just large enough for the dwarf to squeeze inside alone. From its ceiling hung a length of chain terminating in a handle. Delver grasped the handle and pulled it downward three times. As he left the closet and closed the door, a deep, booming gong

sounded through the corridor. Then came a second boom, then a third. The reverberations continued long afterward.

"That's the summons to the gathering," Delver told them. "It can be heard through the whole underground. Come on."

They set off after him and came to an immense room. The light was too dim to illuminate its extremities, but the floor was littered with stones that had fallen from its ceiling. From this room they took a broad stairway that led down; then there was another corridor and more rooms.

Nistur's mind whirled, thinking of the incredible amount of labor it had taken to hew these corridors and chambers out of solid rock, then to decorate and adorn the lot. At last they came to a room not quite as vast as the others, where they found some forty or fifty dwarves gathered on banked stone benches that had been designed to accommodate a far

larger number.

"What is this about, Delver?" said an elderly dwarf whose eyebrows drooped to the sides of his face like a long mustache. "That signal came from your part of the underground."

"And who are these strangers?" demanded a woman almost as old.

"They are friends of Stunbog, here with news of something that concerns all of us," Delver said. "There's trouble above." The old dwarf snorted. "What do we care about that? The nomads can sack and burn the city if they want to. It will never affect us. They won't dare come down here."

"It's not the nomads, Hotforge," Delver said. "Listen to Shellring."

The thief came forward and delivered her story once more. The audience listened with somber expressions.

"We can't let Stunbog rot in the dungeon," said a woman who looked young, for a dwarf. "He saved my child when I had given her up for dead."

"Aye, we owe him too much," said the one called Hotforge.

"Just get him and the other two free," Shellring said. "We won't cause any trouble for you. We'll be on our way as soon as they're out."

The old dwarf turned to face the assembly. "Are we agreed?" Everyone nodded, grunted, or otherwise signaled assent. "All right, then. Who knows that area best?" A bald, middle-aged dwarf raised a hand. "Then tell us about it, Pickbreaker."

The bald one stood to his full, four-foot stature. "When the foundations of the Hall of Justice were dug, our ancestors left in place many of the access tunnels, as was their custom with the greater buildings of the city. These tunnels were seriously weakened in the Cataclysm, and they were filled up lest the building settle."

"How long will it take to dig through the fill to the cell where they are keeping Stunbog?" Delver asked him.

"I'll have to go to the archive and get the plans, but I am sure it will take several hours at least. And then there is the behir."

"I'm already certain that I will not like the answer," said Nistur, "yet I must ask. Just what is the behir?"

"You do not know what a behir is?" Delver said wonderingly.

"They must be rare elsewhere," Nistur answered.

"It is a great worm," said Hotforge. "A vicious reptile twenty paces long. It eats anything it can catch."

"A dragon?" Ironwood asked.

Hotforge shook his head. "No, the behir has no wings, it does not speak, and it does not have fiery or poisonous breath."

"That's a relief," Shelling said shakily. "Instead, it shoots lightning bolts from its mouth," said Hotforge.

"Ah, is that all?" Nistur said. "Well, have no fear. My companion, Ironwood"—he clapped a hand on the mercenary's armored shoulder—"is a renowned dragon-slayer. You see? He wears the skin of a black dragon he slew some years ago. Such a champion will have no difficulty dispatching a mere behir." He glanced up and was shocked to see that Ironwood's face had gone deathly pale, a truly ghastly sight in the fungus light.

"Let's get to work, then," said Hotforge. "Pickbreaker, go find those plans. The rest of you, fetch tools and gather at the old banqueting hall below the palace."

The assembly split up, and the little crowd made their way out through numerous exits. There was an air of high-spirited excitement, as if these folk had little to break the gloomy monotony of their lives and they looked forward to this unusual task.

"This should be enjoyable," Delver told them, flexing the long fingers of his gnarled hands. "I haven't done any decent digging in many years."

"How far do your excavations extend?" Nistur asked as they followed him into yet another of the endless tunnels.

"Wherever you see city above, there is underground

beneath. My ancestors dug the foundations of Tarsis, and when that work was done they extended the diggings for their own use. There are tunnels that go out under the walls. Once, there were small dwarven villages and towns out there, and the people who farmed the land above them never even knew they were there." The dwarf sighed. "That was long ago. We are a dying people now. All the villages are deserted, and so is most of the underground, just a few score of us left out of many thousands in the old days."

"That is sad," Nistur commiserated. He fell back a little and said to Ironwood, in a low voice, "What ails you? Is your illness returning so soon?"

"No, it's just that—" He hesitated. "Well, news of this dragon-thing caught me by surprise."

"But it isn't a real dragon, they say, just sort of a dragon."

"It doesn't have to be very close! Who cares if it doesn't have wings? They'd do it no good down here anyway. It's why the Tarsians put those heavy grates over the street drains."

"Well, the dwarves have coped with the creature for centuries, so let us not allow it to dismay us. I have proclaimed your fame as a dragon-slayer, so act like one!"

"It isn't as though I have much choice," Ironwood grouched.

A few minutes later they were assembled in the banquet hall, a long, narrow room with stone tables down its center and open hearths at each end. At one end of a table, the dwarf named Pickbreaker had spread out a scroll and weighted its corners with bits of rock.

"These are the original plans as made by the master digger when the city was laid out. They've been amended over the centuries as new diggings were added and old ones closed off. The last additions were made just after the Cataclysm. That's when these"—he pointed a stubby finger at some incomprehensible lines and squiggles—"were closed down."

"What sort of task are we looking at?" Hotforge asked.

"There's a plug of about fifty yards of solid masonry between

the nearest access tunnel and the lowest dungeon, where they're keeping Stunbog."

"Fifty yards!" Nistur said, aghast. "Surely you must need many days to carve through so much stone!"

"If they'd used granite, it would take days, even for us," Pickbreaker agreed. "Even if they'd used coral stone from the harbor, it would be something of a task. Luckily, though, they used soft tufa from the nearby hills. It would be a hard dig for you, but we are dwarves. We dig as naturally as you breathe."

"Make the tunnel large enough," Shellring advised. "Stunbog is no lightweight, and Myrsa's as big as Iron-wood here." She punched the mercenary lightly in the stomach, then winced and shook her hand in pain. As she did this a pair of young dwarves scurried into the banquet room.

"The behir's in a lair two levels below the dungeon," said one of them. "But it's asleep."

"I trust it sleeps deeply?" Nistur said.

"A behir can sleep for years," said Hotforge, "but this one's been restless of late. We've heard it moving about. It must be getting hungry."

"Why haven't you killed it?" Ironwood said, irritated. "If the thing sleeps like that, it should be easy."

"Have you ever killed something that spits lightning?" Delver demanded.

"Plenty of them have been killed over the centuries," said Hotforge. "But every time we think we've killed the last of them, another shows up. They hatch in the natural tunnels that are below even our own diggings. When a young one grows too big for the old volcano vents, it moves up here where it's roomier."

"Most unfortunate," Nistur said. "Will your digging activities wake it?"

"That is what we'll find out," Hotforge said. He turned to the other dwarves. "We'll work in two teams. While one digs at the plug, the other will carry the rubble to block up the

behir's access to us. Maybe that will slow it if it comes for us."

"An excellent thought," Nistur commended.

"We are as interested in staying alive as you are," said Hotforge.

"How far is it to this blocked tunnel?" Ironwood asked.

"Come along. I'll show you."

They followed the dwarf leader from the banqueting chamber to a wide, square door about eight feet high. It was not locked, but it was carved all over with dwarven writing. The most fit-looking of the dwarves were already assembled there with picks, sledgehammers, steel rods, and wedges. A team of older dwarves stood by with wheelbarrows to carry off the rubble.

"We are standing," the old dwarf said, "just below the middle of the plaza before the Hall of Justice. Beyond this door was the old access tunnel, one of many used in working on the foundations of this part of the city."

"Such tunnels must have been handy things to have," Nistur observed. "They would give you certain advantages should the folk of the Upper City turn hostile toward your people."

"Open it," Hotforge commanded. With a great creaking of rusty hinges, the door swung back to reveal a solid wall of grayish rock. The stone had been precisely cut, and so compulsive was the dwarves' sense of tidiness in masonry that the facing blocks had been buffed to a dull gloss. The central block bore a few lines of writing and below it a sigil. Hotforge's finger traced the lines of script.

"This says which tunnel was blocked and why, along with the date of the task. This sigil below it is the master mason's mark." He turned to one of the workers standing by. "Remove this block carefully; see that it isn't damaged. We'll replace it when we restore the work. Well, get to it."

Immediately, the dwarves set to their task with the intensity of termites boring into wood. As soon as the inscribed block was free, Hotforge personally pried loose

the block immediately below it and carried the cube of tufa to one of the banqueting tables.

"I'll inscribe this one with the story of our task and the date and place my own mark on it."

"You take your stonework seriously," Nistur observed.

The old dwarf's long eyebrows raised in wonder. "What could be more important?"

"Ah, what, indeed?" Nistur said.

"Of course," Hotforge said sadly, "there may be no one to read it before long. But then, that's something I want to discuss with Stunbog."

"You think he can help you?" Shellring asked.

"Let's get him out first," said the dwarf. "We can talk about it then."

With nothing of importance to do for the time being, the three companions seated themselves at the end of a banqueting table. Some elderly dwarf women brought them food and ale, and the companions set to it with a good appetite.

"I hate having to wait like this," Ironwood complained.

"That is because you are a man of action. I like to employ my leisure time in the acquisition of knowledge. Perhaps we can utilize this time to our mutual satisfaction."

"What do you mean?" Ironwood asked.

Nistur leaned across the table. "My friend, I think it is time we learned about you. For good or ill, our lives have been thrown together. Perhaps another time I will speak of myself, but just now we seem to be deeply involved with you: your past life, your unique infirmity, the odd hostility that certain parties nurse against you. These things affect and endanger all of us." He leaned back and smiled, raising a cup of finely worked alabaster. "Besides, it might take your mind off that monster sleeping below us."

For a long time Ironwood stared at him with a look of near-hostility. Shellring looked back and forth from one to the other uncertainly. Then the mercenary began to speak.

Chapter €kr»en

"The name of my homeland," Ironwood began, "is irrelevant. I was of decent birth, and I thought I had high prospects. Of course, I was very young."

"Many of us began that way," Nistur said.

"Shut up!" Shellring snapped. "I want to hear his story."

"My apologies," Nistur said. "Please continue. I shall strive not to interrupt."

"Well, then, I was trained to be a warrior, as were all the men of my family. But I wanted to be more than a common warrior. I knew I was destined to be a knight, a hero." His face twisted into a rueful smile. "Well, it's a common enough dream for a young man. Few try to act upon it."

He drained his ale cup and put it down. "I was not alone in my vaunting ambitions. In the town next to my father's estate was another young fellow named Boreas. He was the ne'er-do-well son of the town's mayor and wealthiest tradesman. We grew up together, roistered and got into trouble together. His father wanted him to follow in the family business, which was the wine trade, one of the most profitable in our part of the world. Boreas would have none of it. He wanted adventure, and he loved to sing and play the harp and act on the stage. All the townspeople were scandalized, for no one of good birth did such things."

Now his smile contained a wistful fondness. "He cared nothing for them or their offended sensibilities. Boreas had to have the adulation of the crowd, the applause. He loved to be the center of attention. Unfortunately, he was far too popular with the young women, and a day came when he had to flee.

"He came to my family's castle and begged me to go with him. He had heard a tale, he told me. A young black dragon had been seen in the mountains a few leagues from our town. All that night we talked of this marvel. Surely, Boreas said, the creature must guard a treasure, for this is the nature of dragons, or so all the stories tell us. Whether the

treasure was worldly or magical we had no way of knowing, but the beast had already killed some travelers, and the area was gaining a dire reputation.

"Boreas lusted for the treasure and for the sheer adventure of it. He could already see himself spreading the tale of his own deeds with his harp and his voice. But my ambitions were different. I saw only the reputation I would gain by killing a dragon. I knew that most heroes strove and suffered for many years before they gained the esteem of their peers. As a youth, of course, this arduous path held little attraction for me. But by slaying a dragon, I could become a hero with one swift deed. The deadly peril of it only made the prospect more exciting."

He turned to Shellring. "Young men often think that way. They want glory, but they do not want to face the long, hard years of effort required to earn it. They are easily tempted into trying feats far beyond their years to shorten the path. This often leads to death or disaster."

"I understand," she assured him.

"So we set out. Both of us had good horses. I had a lance and my grandfather's long sword, but only the dingy armor I trained in, for my family was not about to have a new harness made for me until they were certain I would grow no more. Still, I felt every inch the hero.

"As we drew nearer the lair of the dragon, we began to hear tales of the thing. It was clearly a young one, for it had established its lair only a year or so previously. Boreas found this news disappointing, for it meant the dragon could not have accumulated a great deal of treasure. As I have said, I did not care about the treasure, and I found the news reassuring. As we traveled, I had found my high aspirations assailed by a terrible doubt. Was I warrior enough to slay a great wyrm? A creature that might have slain an army of heroes by the time it attained full growth? Thus, I was relieved. Surely, I thought, I could handle a very young dragon. And, it seemed to me, slaying any sort of dragon

would qualify me as a hero.

"One day, we found ourselves in a village at the foot of the mountains. It was a serried barrier of three parallel ranges, and the villagers told us that their road would take us to the nearest pass through the mountains. The dragon's lair was high on a slope above the pass in the middle of the second range. They told us of a mountain lake there, surrounded by a heavy forest, and in the shadows of this forest the dragon lurked and sometimes swooped down on travelers passing by.

They were overjoyed to see us, for the dragon had been costing them much of the caravan trade. Traders and other travelers had been avoiding that pass, and once the dragon had even come near the village and carried off a shepherd. We were feted and praised as if we had already attained the status of heroes. In fact, we found the people's hospitality so agreeable that we stayed in the village for five or six days, until they began to hint that it was time we were about the business we had come for. So, amid much singing and throwing of flowers, we rode

from the village and took the road toward the mountains." He picked up his refilled cup and drank, then was silent for a while.

"Well?" Shellring said, impatiently. "What happened after that?"

"I don't remember," Ironwood said.

"What?" she cried incredulously. "You went out and killed a dragon and you don't remember? I've told judges better lies than that!"

".Let him relate his tale his own way," Nistur said soothingly.

"Aye, it is true, I have no memory of the next three days. I think it was three days, at any rate. What I remember is that I awoke on an icy slope, and I was in terrible pain." His eyes were haunted. Clearly this was his most vivid, as well as his most painful, memory.

"I was alone. My grandfather's sword was gone. My armor

was torn, and my right thigh was mangled. With horror I saw how the armor had been shredded and the flesh ripped to the bone. There was blood all around me, and a trail of it leading up the slope. All I could think was that I was alone. What had happened to Boreas? I felt sure that the answer lay at the end of that trail of my own blood.

"So I pushed myself to my feet, and I will tell you that never before or since have I known so terrible a task. The pain in my whole body was intense, and I was weak and dizzy from loss of blood. I had nothing to lean on, and my right leg would bear little weight. I had to hobble a few inches at a time, and this caused the blood to flow from my wounds. I knew by this, and by the near-blackness of the blood on the ground, that I had been unconscious for many hours, perhaps a day or more.

"At the top of the slope was a very strange feature: a dense forest contained in a bowl a few hundred paces in diameter, the whole of it shrouded in a dense mist. In the woods I found a fallen branch that I was able to use as a staff, and after that the going was a little easier. It was not so easy to see my blood on the mat of fallen pine needles as it had been on the snow, but I managed. Even through the haze of pain, I could feel that it was much warmer in the forest than out on the mountain slopes.

"The distance through the forest was not great, but it was one of the longest journeys I have ever undertaken. I could take no more than two or three steps before I needed to pause, fighting off dizziness and sickness the whole way. Truly, I thought I was dying. But I had to know the fate of my friend before I could give up.

"After what seemed an eternity I came to the little lake at the center of the forest. It was from this lake that the mist arose. I dipped my hand into the water and found that it was very warm, almost hot. Beyond doubt it was fed from hot springs deep underground, and it was the lake that sustained so heavy a forest in those cold mountains. I never

learned where it drained, for no stream led from it. I stripped off my now useless armor and paused for a while to rest and bathe my wounds.

"The water seemed to have some healing, or at least restorative, power, for I felt far better after bathing in it. My wounds had ceased to bleed, and the pain was reduced to a bearable limit. I took up my staff and hobbled on, around the lake. In time I came to a spur of the mountain that jutted from a steep, stony slope and plunged into the lake. Where water and stone met there was a fissure, and the moment I saw that crack in the stone, I knew that this must be the dragon's lair."

He paused for a while as the old dwarf women cleared away the plates and refilled the cups. His companions waited with barely suppressed impatience. He took another pull at his ale cup and grimaced.

"I haven't spoken so much in years. It makes the throat dry."

"But it is good for the soul," Nistur said. "Please, go on."

"Yes, what happened next?" Shellring urged.

"In later years," Ironwood said, "I learned that black dragons are usually found in the lowlands. They love swamps and deep forest. This one must have just left the nest, seeking its own lair and territory. Perhaps it was at the end of its strength when it spotted that freakish hot lake and its forest and cave. It must have decided that this would do for its first home. As soon as it regained its strength, it began its depredations.

"But I knew none of that at the time. I just knew that I had to find Boreas. So, unarmed and all but naked, I waded into the lake once more and made my way along the shallows, into the cave." His mouth twisted in a sour smile. "Even in my fear, I found the stench within appalling. In the stories, you always hear of great wyrms lying atop heaps of treasure. In those stories the dragon's lair is a cave transformed into a palace. Let me inform you that this is not true of a young dragon intent only on feeding and growing. I passed bits of

carcasses, mostly those of sheep and horses, but some may have been human. All smelled equally bad. Near the back of the cave, I found the dragon."

He took a deep breath. The others seemed not to breathe at all.

"It was dead, and the signs of a terrible fight were everywhere. I saw bits of my own armor and, no doubt, bits of me, scattered about the cave. The creature lay on the sandy floor, pierced by a number of ghastly wounds. My broken spear was nearby, as was my grandfather's sword, now twisted like a piece of wire. Human and dragon blood mingled all over the floor.

"The dragon was about the size of a large draft horse, although its neck and tail gave it far greater length. When I saw it, and what it had done, I understood for the first time my folly in ever dreaming that I could slay a great wyrm single-handed. It was a most humbling experience.

"I had to decide what to do. There was no sign of Boreas, nor of our horses. I might freeze on the slopes, and I had to regain my strength before making my way out of the mountains. In fact, I was not at all certain that I would survive my wounds. But I had come to that place to be a dragon-slayer, and I wanted proof of the deed. I still had my knife, so I began to skin the dragon."

He looked at the two of them somberly. "It is a long, hard task, skinning a dragon. It took me several days to accomplish it."

"But what did you live on?" Shellring asked. "Did you hunt?"

"He did not need to," said Nistur. "He had dragon meat."

"Aye, and I can affirm that it is very sustaining. In fact, between the dragon's flesh and the waters of the lake, I healed with amazing speed. Later, I learned that this was the dragon's true vengeance on me, for I began to hope again. I did not know yet that my wounds were indeed mortal. That was to come later.

"The dragon bore many small wounds from the fight, and

two that might have been mortal. One was a great rent in its chest. Another pierced the roof of its mouth. I do not know which was the deathblow, nor who dealt it. Indeed, I do not know if I killed the thing at all. It may have been Boreas. Perhaps I have lied about myself for all these years.

"My search of the dragon's lair turned up no treasure. Apparently this one had not yet developed its acquisitive skills." He held up the hand upon which gleamed the knotted ring. "I found only this, which had probably been on the hand of one of its victims. Even I knew its significance, so I took it, feeling that it might come in handy someday, as indeed it did.

"Finally, I had the dragon's hide rolled into a bundle. I wanted to take its head as well, but I knew I would never be able to bear the weight. The hide would tax my strength to the fullest as it was. One thing I could not bring myself to do; I could not open the dragon's stomach. I feared that I would find the remains of Boreas there."

"I can understand how that might be a daunting prospect," Nistur said. Shellring's glare silenced him.

"Long had I dreamed of returning to my home as a hero, to be adored for the rest of my life. Now I had my dragon skin, but I knew I could never go back. I was certain that I had caused the death of Boreas, who had been far more popular in the district than I, whose father was a powerful man, and for whom I nursed a crippling guilt. So I set out for the far side of the pass.

"For months I made my way on foot through the wilderness. When my store of dried dragon meat was exhausted, I lived on what I could trap, catch with my hands, or bring down with rocks or with my knife lashed to my staff. A hundred times I was tempted to abandon that hide, for it was the weight of the thing that kept me to such a slow pace, and sometimes I had to drag, rather than carry it. But then I would reflect on all it had cost me. And so I would shoulder it again and carry on.

"In time I found that I was out of the mountains and in a district of rich, cultivated fields. In the villages I traded a few dragon scales for food and clothing. People looked at me strangely, and I must have presented a wild appearance. Surely they thought me mad, but a madman who carries a dragon hide on his back is worthy of respect everywhere. At a river wharf I traded some dragon claws for barge passage to the nearest city and there I found an armorer."

He stretched his long arms, displaying his scaly harness. "The armorer made this harness for me. It required only half the hide, and he took the other half as pay for his art. He was so pleased with the trade that he threw in a helmet, a decent sword, and a passable horse.

"From that day to this, I have earned my bread as a mercenary, a common sell-sword who fights in other people's wars for pay. It is far from being a knight, but I no longer aspire to such foolishness."

"It is a story worthy of a great poem," Nistur said.

"When did you learn about your . . . uh, your condition?" Shellring asked tentatively.

"It was about two years later," Ironwood answered. "I began to feel a tingling in my fingers sometimes. I thought I was just training too hard with the sword and shield, and thought nothing of it. Then it began in my toes. Then my hands and feet began to go completely numb. When my hands trembled I tried to hide it from my comrades, but in time some of them began to notice.

"An army is a tight little world, my friends. Everyone knows all about everyone else, or fancies that he does. Rumors are treated as revelations from the gods. I was already a strange figure in the brotherhood of mercenaries, a man who might have killed a dragon but was no sort of hero. Then my infirmity became known because it struck while we were in battle. More than once I was wounded because of it, although it was nowhere near as crippling as it is now. The

rumors began to center on me. I was a man under a curse; some god or baleful spirit hovered over me, waiting to do me harm. I was an unlucky man to have around.

"Once a soldier bears such a reputation, brave deeds, loyalty, and skill at arms are to no avail. Men avoid him. Captains will not have him in their bands. A man who is unlucky brings ill luck to everyone near him. And there was something else." The mercenary's eyes were more haunted than ever.

"As if you had not problems enough!" Nistur said.

Shellring nudged him to silence. "What is it?"

"I began to see a dragon, sometimes in my dreams, sometimes in my waking hours. At first I thought these visions to be the phantoms of a disordered mind, for I spied it only at night or in the dusk, at a great distance. I thought it might be the spirit of the one slain on the mountainside, but this was no infant. It was a great wyrm; that much was apparent even from afar. But then others spotted the thing. It was real.

"In time, I chanced to pass again through the town where my armor had been made. I was appalled to find it utterly destroyed, so recently that the ruins still smoked. It was not the wreck of war. The place had been attacked by a dragon, and no one had been spared. Men, women, and children were slain by the hundreds, and the survivors were half mad with terror. I knew that this was no coincidence. No dragon had been seen in those parts for many generations. Those who could speak at all agreed on one thing: the dragon had been black.

"I sought out a wizard of the Red Robes, one learned in dragon lore, and told him my tale. He found it a most interesting case. He said that the presence of a black dragon in cold lands was most rare, for that breed love the hot lands and dwell in deep jungles and dismal swamps. He determined that the young one must have left the nest too soon and strayed into the cold mountains while searching

out a lair of its own. The hot spring and the dark cavern drew it to the place where we found it. It would soon have left in search of warmer climes." He paused, as if the next part were especially painful.

"Because it left the nest too young, its mother was searching for it. She must have found the cave not long after I staggered away from it." He thumped the scales over his chest. "Somehow, she has tracked me by this armor. She destroyed that town because the armorer still had the balance of the baby dragon's hide in his possession. She would have found me long ago, but I kept moving, and she hunts only at night, and then only for a few days at a time, for she cannot abide the cold for long."

"Why not rid yourself of that hide?" Shellring asked. "It can't be that valuable."

"I've tried," he said. "Something prevents me from removing it, or even leaving the seams open for more than a few minutes at a time. I once tried to have a companion take it off me while I lay drugged. The moment he tugged at it, I snapped awake and half killed him before I came to my senses."

"A most daunting prospect, my friend," Nistur said. "It seems you have a choice of fates, and your principle amusement lies in seeing which kills you first, the effects of the young dragon's poison or its mother's vengeance."

Ironwood leaned back, looking exhausted. "In time, like every mercenary for a hundred leagues around, I ended up in Tarsis. The local wars had petered out, and it was one of the few major cities I had not yet tried. I hoped to find a mercenary band that had not heard about me. Failing that, I was contemplating turning to banditry."

He looked at them gloomily. "So much for my youthful yearnings to be a great hero, eh?"

"Perhaps fate has a different destiny in store for you," Nistur said.

"It had better take shape soon," Ironwood replied. "I have a

feeling there's not much time left."

"That shaman hinted that he knew of a cure," Shellring said hopefully. "Do you think he does?"

"I would not trust Shadespeaker," said Nistur, "to cure a wart." He caught the look of doubt on Ironwood's craggy features. "None of that, my friend! I can see what you are thinking: perhaps the shaman knows something. That is just your hope speaking. For understandable reasons you desperately want to believe that the smelly savage has a cure for your ailment, and this lends his claims undeserved credibility in your mind. It is thus that crafty horse traders take advantage of us, causing us to perceive virtues in their nags that we find to be absent when we have ridden them a few leagues. We are easily gulled, for who among us does not desire to find a very fine, yet cheaply priced steed?"

"And you shouldn't give up just yet," Shellring said. "We're going to get Stunbog out of prison. Give him enough time, and Stunbog can find a cure for anything!"

"Our nimble-fingered friend exaggerates a trifle," Nistur said, "but she has truth on her side. Who knows what we may yet encounter? It is a large and magical world."

Ironwood snorted. "Never fear, if I were the sort to give up, I'd have done so long ago." He frowned. "What have the dwarves accomplished?"

They rose and went to the door, then stood aside as an older dwarf trundled a wheelbarrow of rubble from the excavation. The three peered in wonderingly. The industrious dwarves seemed to have melted into the rock, and now a straight-sided tunnel stretched before the companions. Clumps of luminous fungi had been stuck to the ceiling, but they could see nothing beyond the first few paces. The air was full of rock dust, and from far away they could hear the sound of tools against stone, working with madiinelike rapidity.

Nistur gave a low whistle. "They told no he about their affinity for digging. They go through stone like a mole through soft soil." Even as he spoke he had to step aside for

another laden wheelbarrow coming out, then for three more going back in empty.

"How did you come to know about these people?" Ironwood asked Shellring.

"I've spent most of my life in Old City cellars. When I was a child I explored all the tunnels I could find. Sometimes I'd meet a dwarf. They aren't very sociable toward people who live above ground, but they could see I didn't represent any threat. When Stunbog came to live out in the harbor, I told them about him."

They went back to the table. "Had you no family?" Nistur asked.

"If I did, I don't remember them. I've picked up my living on the streets and in the cellars as long as I can recall." She laughed ruefully. "At least the two of you have been something and have traveled. I've never been anyplace but here, and I've never been anything but a thief."

"But you are a very good thief," Nistur pointed out. "A true paragon among thieves."

"And you've been a loyal friend," Ironwood commended.

"These last few days with the two of you have been the most interesting of my life," she admitted. She raised the seal that dangled from her neck and gazed at it fondly. "And it's been great fun having this and lording it over the citizens." She let it drop and sighed. "I suppose all that will be over soon."

"Of all the statements we may make," Nistur said, "predictions of the future must be among the most ill-advised. Let us meet the coming hours as best we can. I doubt that any of our previous experience will be of great use to us, but that is what makes this life so exciting."

With full stomachs, they rested for a while, then nodded off at the table with their heads pillowed on their arms, oblivious of the distantly clinking tools and the rumbling of the wheelbarrows. They awakened when dwarven hands shook their shoulders.

"We're beneath the cell now," Hotforge told them. "Do you

want to be there when we bring them out?"

"Decidedly!" Nistur said, standing and snatching up his hat. "I have been involved in jailbreaks before, but none as unique as this!"

Ironwood yawned and stretched, making his armor creak. "I would not miss this," he agreed.

Shellring was already up and running to the door when a low vibration rumbled through the huge room. "What's that?" she demanded. "Earthquake?" She looked up in near panic. The Cataclysm had left Tarsians with a permanent fear of falling masonry.

"Probably nothing/" Hotforge said. "Let us hope so, anyway."

They followed him into the dimness of the tunnel, where the rock dust was settling to the floor and the sound of the tools had stilled. The tunnel was adequately wide, but Ironwood had to stoop to clear the low ceiling, and Nistur had to remove his hat. Only Shellring could walk upright with ease. They came to the end of the tunnel, which had been widened into a circular room with a much higher roof. In the center, a few blocks had been retained so that a final workman could stand and work on the last stones overhead. With a chisel he was chipping away at the mortar with almost silent taps of a hammer. As each block began to fall free, he caught it and lowered it to another worker.

To Nistur, this spot looked no different from the rest of the tunnel they had come through. "Are you certain that this is the correct spot?" he asked.

The dwarf leader looked offended. "How could we be wrong?"

"How, indeed?" Nistur mused.

Then they all paused as another vibration rumbled through the tunnel. Fine powder sifted down from the new cutting, and they looked at one another in silence. Moments later, one of the young dwarves rushed in.

"It's waking!" he cried.

"Quick, now!" Hotforge commanded. "Get those last stones

down! We've no time to be quiet or tidy. We must be away from here swiftly!"

The dwarf atop the pile of blocks redoubled his efforts, but the dwarven compulsion for perfect stonework was beyond the exigencies of emergency situations, and he continued to cut away the mortar, working around the edges of the blocks.

Ironwood snatched up a sledgehammer. "Get out of my way!" He bounded up to the top of the stone pile, knocking aside the finicky mason. With a powerful surge, he swung the hammer against the stone overhead. Stone chips rained down. Ironwood shook dust from his eyes and swung again, this time shutting his eyelids at the last moment. Larger fragments rained down.

"This is outrageous!" groaned the mason. "Scandalous!"

"In times like these we must set custom aside," Hotforge said in consolation.

With a third swing, great chunks of stone began to fall. Ironwood himself fell back from the stone platform, to be caught by dwarven hands. The dust cleared, and a gaping hole was visible in the ceiling.

"What is happening?" a voice boomed hollowly from above.

"Stunbog?" Shellring cried. "We're breaking you out!" A head poked down through the new aperture. The broad, handsome face looked astonished, and the long braids hung down toward the floor. "Shelbing?" Myrsa said.

"Come on!" Shellring urged, almost dancing with impatience. "We don't have much time. There's some sort of monster on the way!"

Even as she spoke there came another rumbling, accompanied by a crashing noise and a prolonged, hissing shriek.

"It's breaking through the barrier!" Hotforge said. He grabbed one of the young dwarves by the tunic. "Run and tell everyone to get out and drop the iron portcullis that closes off the banquet hall." He turned to the other workers.

"Out with you! We've done what we can here. If the thing gets through the portcullis, keep retreating and dropping the barriers. Try to lure it into one of the deadfall traps. Go!"

The workers dashed off.

"What about you?" Nistur asked. Ironwood was already back atop the platform of blocks, frantically smashing away at the stone overhead, widening the hole.

"I will stay," Hotforge asserted. "I am old and might as well die. If we don't kill the thing, it will eat the lot of us. Then it will sleep, and maybe those of my people who are left can kill it."

"Never fear," Nistur assured him, "my dragon-slayer companion will take care of it."

"Dragon-slayer he may be," Hotforge rumbled, "but he's a wretched stonemason." He eyed the ragged hole in the ceiling with deep disgust.

Ironwood sprang from the blocks. "They're coming down now!"

Myrsa dropped through first, landing on the blocks as surefootedly as a mountain goat. Ironwood steadied her as she reached up and caught Stunbog, who was lowered by Badar. Then the two of them cleared off the platform as the young barbarian dropped through.

"I am very curious to learn how you accomplished this," Stunbog said, brushing rock dust from his robe.

"No time for that," Nistur said, loosening his sword in its sheath. "There is something called a behir on its way toward us. It is rumored to be formidable."

Badar blinked, his face registering a strange mixture of elation and panic. "What is this place?"

Shellring rushed to his side. "We're in a dwarf cave. Don't worry; there's a way out. But we have a bigger worry just now."

"You think I am afraid?" Badar said. "I fear no beast! I just need a weapon."

Nistur smiled fondly. "There speaks the confidence of youth."

"Come on!" Ironwood shouted. His sword was already out.
"Let's be away from here!"

Hotforge was already in the lead, and they followed him along the dimly lit tunnel toward the banqueting hall. The former prisoners had no trouble coping with the fungus light, for their cell had been even dimmer. At the mouth of the tunnel, Hotforge paused and peered out into the great hall.

"No sign of it yet," he muttered. "It's a long dash to the doorway, but if we make it they'll raise the portcullis and we may be through before it—"

Abruptly, something surged through a side door, flowing liquidly into the banqueting hall, taking some stone from the sides and lintel of the door as it entered. With most of its length through the door, they could see that, reptilian though the thing was, it was not a true serpent. It moved on multiple pairs of short legs, and these propelled its forty-foot length with amazing swiftness. Its long neck swayed from side to side, the bulging, slit-pupiled eyes in the crocodilian head searching the great room for prey. Long, slender spines swept back from the

head along its neck, rising and falling with each breath.

The threatened company drew slowly back within the tunnel. By now all except Stunbog were equipped with weapons of a sort. Badar and Hotforge gripped sledgehammers. Shellring and Myrsa held iron pry bars. These were about six feet in length, one end flattened and slightly curved, the other pointed.

"Can the beast hear us?" Nistur whispered.

"Not if we talk low," Hotforge answered.

"Then if anyone has any ideas," Nistur said, "now is the time to share them. I confess that I am at a loss."

"You said this on"—Hotforge jerked a thick thumb toward Ironwood—"is a great dragon-slayer!"

"It was a long time ago," Ironwood said, "and it was a small dragon."

"We can always go back to the cell," Nistur said. "We'd get out of there eventually."

"I'll not abandon my people to fight the behir!" Hotforge said. "And I'll not cower in a Tarsian dungeon!"

"Peace, my friends," Stunbog counseled. "Let me assess our situation. Then perhaps we can formulate a plan."

They crouched a few paces within the tunnel while Stunbog tiptoed toward the entrance. To all appearances, the behir had not yet spotted the tunnel. Instead it went toward the much larger main door and looked at the iron portcullis. It pushed at the iron grate, which creaked but did not move. In frustration the behir butted its head against it, but the grate did not yield.

While the creature was thus occupied, Stunbog studied it and the banqueting hall. Besides its dimensions, he took note of the iron torch sconces that jutted from the walls and the wheel-shaped bronze chandeliers that hung from the stone ceiling. The long stone tables and benches were fixed, apparently carved from solid bedrock and in one piece with the floor. As the behir began to turn, Stunbog backed within the tunnel. He beckoned to the others, and they all retreated.

"Did you learn anything of use?" Ironwood asked.

"What we have here," Stunbog said, "is indeed a true behir. It is no dragon, but it will be just as hard to kill."

"I was hoping for something more encouraging," Nistur said.

"Let me finish. The behir has some magical qualities, but basically it is just a very large reptile: fierce, active when hungry, sluggish when sated, and almost brainless. Just now, it gives every evidence of being hungry."

"It spits lightning!" Hotforge said.

"True," Stunbog allowed, "but once having employed this formidable weapon, it will need some time to generate another bolt."

"Excellent," Ironwood said sourly. "We let it fry one of us, and the rest try to hack and hammer it to death."

"Allow me to wax pedantic for a moment," Stunbog said. "There are two types of lightning, the natural and the magical. Natural lightning is the common sort we see striking from the clouds in a thunderstorm. It is terrible and dangerous, but it is not intelligently directed unless it is used by a god. The gods have not manifested themselves in a very long time. Magical lightning is called up by a very accomplished wizard, or employed by a creature with magical qualities, such as the one who waits hungrily without. Both sorts of lightning have a strong affinity for earth, and it is known that they may be drawn toward the earth by metal, and their power thus drained away."

"You think we can neutralize its lightning?" Nistur asked.

Stunbog looked at each of them in turn. "If we use the resources we have, and if we act very quickly and very bravely, I think we can."

"And after that, how do we kill it?" Hotforge inquired.

"As for that," Stunbog said, "I must defer to our 2 dragon-slayer."

They all looked at Ironwood. For a moment his expression registered dismay; then his features hardened. "Well, let's be about it, then. We have little time." I

For a while they crouched in a huddle, heads together, while Stunbog and Ironwood drew figures on the dust of the tunnel floor with their fingertips. When they were done, Shellring and Badar went through the tunnel and brought back more of the long pry bars. Then there was nothing more to be done by way of preparation.

Having made up his mind, Ironwood showed no hesitation. "Let's go!" He led the way, gripping one of the steel bars in both hands. Shellring now held his sword, ready to hand it to him or use it herself in direst extremity. None of them had much faith in the efficacy of swords against the beast's armored hide.

As they rushed from the tunnel, the behir, sensing the movement, whirled with startling speed on its numerous

legs. The snakelike tail whipped about, snapping against the walls as the head raised on its long neck for a better view. From chandelier level, it looked down, the head turning from side to side, spines laid flat against its neck, as it brought the gaze of first one slit-pupiled eye, then the other, against each foe in turn. All were about equally distant and equally active. The terrible beast seemed to suffer from the primitive-brained reptilian problem of making a selection.

Ironwood, Myrsa, Badar, and Nistur, each holding a pry bar, rushed to four of the torch sconces. Shellring capered about, waving the curved sword to provide distraction. Hotforge brandished his hammer and yelled instructions at the young dwarves beyond the portcullis. These immediately began to leap about and hoot derision

at the beast. Stunbog had stressed that the iron grate would quickly and safely ground the lightning bolt.

But the behir was interested only in the maddening, tempting creatures in the room with it. And it was hungry. Robbed of any other criterion for judgment, its attention centered on what looked like the most satisfying meal. Ignoring the others, its head swayed back and forth between Ironwood and Myrsa. The two cursed at it imaginatively, gripping their bars against the sconces behind them, gritting their teeth against the terror to come.

Myrsa went silent and pale as the great head, three times the length of a horse's, stilled. The huge yellow eyes, side-mounted though they were, swiveled and fixed on her with a stare only slightly less horrifying than that of a basilisk. She held the bar in a white-knuckled grip, wedging its butt into a gap in the strap-iron bars of the scone behind her. She knew that when she released the bar, it would remain wedged only a fraction of a second before falling to the floor. Her life hung on that instant.

The behir's long, narrow lower jaw dropped open, revealing serrated, sharklike teeth and a quivering, three-forked tongue. The slender spines shot erect to form a semicircular

fan behind the crocodilian head.

"Now!" Stunbog shouted.

The word, Myrsa's desperate lunge, the flash, and the thunderous blast all seemed to occur at once. Hotforge and the dwarves behind the portcullis all howled as the dazzling bolt assaulted their sensitive eyes. The rest were stunned for a moment, and when their vision cleared they saw that the bar and the sconce glowed dull red and were now welded firmly together. Myrsa lay ten feet away, her eyes open but whether she was dead, unconscious, or merely disoriented, it was impossible to tell.

For a long moment the behir was still, apparently stymied by this unexpected development. Then, with a shout, Badar ran to his sister, and the behir coiled itself to strike.

Ironwood turned to Nistur and grinned. "Well, my friend, here is where a hero earns his pay." With a bellow, he gripped his pry bar in both hands and charged.

Instantly distracted, the terrible head whipped toward him. Nistur yelled and attacked, but with less enthusiasm. Shellring whirled and screamed maniacally, and even Stunbog jumped, waving his arms, his robe flapping, all dignity forgotten. Their best chance lay in keeping the creature's nut-sized brain overloaded with stimuli.

But now that its attention was firmly fixed, it forgot all else. It wanted Ironwood. The behir's jaws gaped once again, and its head lunged forward on the end of its long, muscular neck. With a precise lunge, Ironwood thrust the point of his bar into its tongue, skewering it to the lower jaw. With a squalling hiss, the behir's head whipped from side to side, trying to shake both weapon and man loose, but the mercenary kept the bar clamped tight against his side and stuck fast as a burr.

Nistur lunged with his bar against the monster's side, throwing his full weight behind the weapon, but the point rebounded from the armor plating. Then the lashing tail swept his feet from beneath him, and he landed on his back,

the wind bursting from his lungs and his pry bar flying across the room to clang against a wall.

With a final shake of its head, the behir shook the bar from its mouth. Now driven by fury and hate as much as by hunger, it lunged for Ironwood again. He had managed to keep on his feet, but he was caught off-balance this time, and his point slid to one side of the jaw instead of plunging into the tongue as before. Desperately, he pushed the iron bar sideways into the mouth and gripped it with both hands. With his arms at full extension to each side of the terrible jaws, his head was two inches from them when they snapped shut.

Enraged with this unwontedly stubborn dinner, the behir raised its head until it cracked against the ceiling. Ironwood hung from the bar like an acrobat on a trapeze as the reptilian head swung back and forth and the bar bent into the semblance of an inverted U. Then something occurred to the monster's tiny brain, and its head lowered as its body arched slightly from the floor and the foremost pair of legs reached up for its tormentor.

Badar helped Myrsa to her feet, and she shook her head, listening to his babbling as the stars cleared from her vision. She saw the forelegs close on Ironwood, their claws scraping at his tough armor, the belly of the animal now exposed. Shoving Badar aside, she ran to snatch up the pry bar that had flown from Nistur's hand. Then, screaming a barbarian war cry, she ran to the beast and launched the weapon like a spear from a distance of ten feet. The steel bar sank half its length into the smaller, softer scales of the behir's belly.

Following his sister's example, Badar rushed in and hurled his own bar from close range. It sank in a hands-breadth beside hers. The monster squealed, and Ironwood dropped to the floor, his bar now bitten raggedly into two pieces. He retained his hold on the pointed end, now only three feet long.

Nistur, back on his feet with his sword out, ran up to the

monster's side and slashed with his sword. This blow having no effect, he essayed a lunge with his point, striking between the large scales. With his whole weight behind the lunge, his fine, dwarf-forged blade bent in a perfect arc, but it did not penetrate. Leaping back to avoid a lash of the tail, he cursed.

"You might as well assault a castle with a toothpick!" he cried, resheathing the blade without looking down at his scabbard. He looked around for a more effective weapon.

Despite everyone's best efforts, the behir was fixed on Ironwood with reptilian obsession. The mercenary was back on his feet, the short, pointed bar gripped in both hands, his fury raised to a pitch equaling his enemy's. The two were dementedly determined to kill one another.

The behir's head raised and, with a honking bellow, it came down on Ironwood, jaws impossibly agape, enveloping the upper half of the mercenary's body. As the others stood paralyzed in stunned disbelief, Ironwood leapt from the floor as if eager to be swallowed. The terrible jaws clamped down, the teeth biting on the armored waist, raising the man from the floor as the jaws worked sideways, grinding, trying to force this disagreeable dinner down its gullet.

"No!" Nistur cried, snatching up a sledgehammer and rushing to the beast's side. He slammed the twenty-pound steel head against the thing's neck, but apparently to no avail. Hotforge, whose vision had partially returned, plied his own hammer in the same fashion from the other side. Myrsa and Badar tugged their pry bars loose, then plunged them in again while Shellring took Ironwood's sword in both hands and slashed vigorously but ineffectually at the scaly neck.

The behir, intent on swallowing its prey, ignored them all. The beast gave a final contortion of its jaws, and the armored feet disappeared within. The head rocked forward and back on its long neck with the unmistakable aspect of a bird or reptile that has swallowed something too large for it.

The others redoubled their efforts; then all were sent flying

as the tail lashed around and all twelve legs shot out sideways. The neck bent into a huge S and went rigid. The eyes stared at nothing, and all movement ceased for several long seconds. Then, slowly and gracefully, the behir collapsed. The neck rolled down on the floor, and the head dropped, its long lower jaw crashing on the floor. The lidless eyes rolled upward until the slit pupils were invisible; then the yellow balls turned dull.

Slowly, unable to believe it and suspecting some sort of reptilian trick, the survivors approached the thing. "Look at that!" Shellring gasped. She pointed to a spot on the top of the behir's head, six inches behind the eyes, from which a foot of bloody steel spike protruded.

Nistur shook his head with admiration. "It just doesn't pay to swallow a hero."

"It's still alive!" Shellring cried as a muscular convulsion ran through the neck.

"Its muscles will retain a semblance of life for several hours, but it is dead."

"It is still trying to swallow," Nistur noted. A large lump was moving down the neck toward the body. It stopped, and a smaller bulge formed on the greater one. They gazed in wonder at this prodigy; then a rip appeared in the soft, lower side of the neck and a scale-armored arm emerged, the hand gripping a curved dagger.

"He's still alive!" Shellring cried. She flailed at the tough neck until Myrsa took the sword gently from her hands.

"Let me have that." The barbarian woman gripped the curved sword in both hands and raised it. Bracing one foot on the monster's neck, she brought the keen blade down with great force and even greater precision, catching the edge of the cut Ironwood had made without touching his arm, opening a three-foot gash.

"Get him out of there!" Nistur cried. He and Badar grasped the protruding arm and tugged. Ironwood emerged from the opening, covered with blood and foul-smelling slime. Even

as they watched, amazed, his dragon-scale armor was changing in appearance. The black scales turned dark blue, then a lighter blue, the color fading until the scales were transparent. Their tips began to curl upward; then they fell away like winter leaves in a wind, revealing the mottled gray hide beneath. The hide itself began to fall away in shreds.

"He is rid of his cursed armor!" Stunbog cried. The healer stooped to pull away the ruined hide in handfuls. "The digestive acids of the behir must be powerful enough to dissolve dragon scale! It protected him just long enough to preserve his life." Stunbog chuckled gleefully. "We may have added something new to the lore of this curious creature."

"Interpret it thus if you will," Nistur murmured, helping the healer clear away the wreckage of the once-magnificent armor. "I would rather call it the reward of heroism. But then, I am a poet."

The mercenary dragged long, shuddering gulps of air into his lungs. "Am I alive?" he gasped when he had breath to spare.

Stunbog crouched beside him and made a quick examination. "Not only alive, but also not even badly injured."

Nistur smiled and clapped Ironwood on a befouled shoulder. "And now, my friend," he said, smiling, "can you doubt that it was really you who slew that black dragon?"

TOO

Chapter Croetoe

In the dwarves' principal living area, the combatants rested and had their various injuries tended to while they planned their next moves. All except for Stunbog suffered from minor injuries. Ironwood had been the most roughly used, as well as being in breamtaking need of a bath. While this was accomplished the dwarves laid out a minor banquet for them. Hotforge was now mightily pleased with his human friends. Because of them, his name would shine forever

among his people as one who had fought a behir at close quarters.

With his healing duties finished, Stunbog stayed for some time in deep conversation with Hotforge and other dwarf elders. He wrote down for them a detailed list of the values and uses of the various bodily parts of the behir. Disposing of the huge carcass was going to be something of a feat, but he assured them that there was substantial profit to be had from selling to wizards those parts with magical properties. When this was accomplished, Nistur regaled the healer with the strange tale of Ironwood's unfortunate early adventures, adding poetic embellishments as his gift dictated. When he was done with the story, Stunbog pondered long on these events.

When Ironwood rejoined them, cleaned up and rubbed with liniment, they set about planning in earnest.

"Shellring tells us that you interpreted those sigils on Shadespeaker's hands," Ironwood said to Stunbog.

"So I did. You recall that I said they were not of a protective nature, but of a deceptive one?"

"That you did," the mercenary affirmed.

"In my book of sigils, just before we were carried off, I found one that was almost an exact match for the one you saw. It is a sigil of changing."

"Sigil of changing?" Nistur said. "Might you elucidate?"

"Certainly. A sigil of changing is a part of a spell that in some way alters the appearance of a person or a thing. It is a superficial spell, mind you. It alters only the appearance, never the substance."

"There are many such?" Nistur asked.

"Oh, a great many. I pored through pages of them before I found the one you saw."

"What sort of change does it bring about?" Ironwood asked.

"It alters the color of the eyes." They stared at him. "Are you sure?" Nistur said. Stunbog shrugged. "Unless you remembered the sigil incorrectly."

"But how could that protect him from the truth-fiend?" Shellring asked.

"An excellent question, and one to which I have no immediate answer," Stunbog told her.

"Does this mean that Shadespeaker is a wizard in truth?" Nistur asked.

"Not necessarily. As I have said, this is a very superficial spell. One who is well versed in the Arts can prepare such a spell, of which the sigil is only a part, the rest being a simple incantation, and sell it to a buyer, who may then use it at will. However, this user cannot then transfer it to another. It will work only for that one, and in time it will lose effectiveness. Then he must have it renewed by one who has the true power."

Ironwood was brooding deeply. "Eye color," he said, as if to himself.

"The man's eyes were a deep brown, as I recall," Nistur mused. "Not that it was easy to judge in the dimness of the tent, behind all those strings of amulets and with the surrounding skin smeared with green paint. Why would he change the color of his eyes? Surely such a rogue is beyond common vanity."

A young dwarf rushed in and spoke in a low voice with Hotforge. The dwarf leader addressed the little company. "I sent some spies up to sound out the city. We have places where we can overhear without being detected. The nomads are massed for an assault. Within two hours they are to attack. A truce has been called for a conference. The lord and his Inner Council go out to speak with Kyaga and deliver the murderer of the chieftains. Failing that, they have safe conduct back to the city, and the attack commences the moment the gates shut."

"Access to cellars is a handy thing," Nistur noted.

"It might be a trap," Ironwood said. "Once they are all in his camp, Kyaga may not let them go. It is a foolish move."

"Kyaga swore an oath by the ancestors of all the nomads

that his promise of safe conduct is genuine," Hotforge said.

"If he swore by ancestors," Badar said, "he must be true to his oath. If he break it, no chief or warrior follow him."

"Since we found no better suspect," Nistur said, "the lord is going to surrender Councilor Melkar to Kyaga. That will be enough. The man is the only competent soldier in the council. The others count for nothing."

"So what are we to do?" Stunbog said.

"I confess I am stymied," Nistur admitted. "It chafes me sorely that we have not found the slayer. Councilor Melkar's fate is unjust, but none of these people seems destined for a good end. They are inveterate schemers and treacherous scoundrels by birthright."

"We undertook to uncover the guilty," Ironwood said with finality, "and that we shall do!"

They looked at him in wonder. "Hotforge," the mercenary said, "you've told us that you dwarves have tunnels leading under the walls and far out into the countryside. Have you access to the nomads' camp?"

"Surely. If you want to go there, I can place you inside Kyaga's tent, should you wish it."

"Excellent!"

"My friend—" Nistur began, but a swift gesture of Ironwood's hand cut him off.

"Give me leave for a moment. Now I must plan like an officer. We are going to confront the lot of them and I must plan each move carefully."

"You know who the killer is, then?" Stunbog said hopefully.

"No, but I can feel him within my grasp." He held up a broad hand and closed the fingers inward as if crushing something.

"It is all here, in what we have learned."

"That is a slender reed upon which to lean our hopes," Nistur said. "Suppose, at the last instant, the solution still eludes you?"

"You need not come," Ironwood said. "I'll go alone if need be."

Nistur clapped a hand over his heart. "You wound me deeply, sir! Of course I go where you go."

"I'd not miss this," Stunbog said.

"And I go with Stunbog," Myrsa insisted.

"No," Ironwood said to her. "I want you and your brother to go into the city and get us some horses. What money have we?" They pooled their coins on the table. "This may be enough for some decent nags. No need for fiery steeds. If you can get only five, Shellring can ride double."

Hotforge tossed a bulging leather sack onto the table. "Here. If you are going to buy horses, get good ones. It sounds as if you may soon be on the run. If so, your only hope is sound horseflesh. We have plenty of coin, and not a great deal of use for it."

"I thank you," Ironwood said simply. Then, to the barbarians he said, "Don't haggle, just overpay if you have to. Every second counts now."

Hotforge addressed Stunbog. "I have one more favor to ask of you."

"If it is in my power to grant, it is yours." The two conferred in low voices for a few moments.

"The gates are closed up tight," Shellring said. "How do you plan to get away?"

"I can get you out," Hotforge said. "We'll guide you from the horse market. There is a broad underground passage, large enough for horses. It leads to a little rise just south of the city."

"Excellent. The rest of us will meet you there, providing we live."

Myrsa looked doubtfully to Stunbog, but he nodded. Slowly, she nodded as well. "Be off with you now, my dear," he said.

"We will meet with you soon." She gestured to Badar, and the two left with Delver and some others leading them. Shellring gazed wistfully after the younger barbarian.

"No sense wasting time," Ironwood said, standing. "Let us be

off. I want to be there when the two parties meet."

Nistur stood as well. "Why not? It will be a deed worthy of a poem. By the way, suppose we fail to satisfy the lord or Kyaga or both?"

"Then we run for it," Ironwood answered.

Nistur laughed. "That should be a short but exciting chase."

As the dwarves led them through the vast, gloomy, and seemingly endless tunnels, Stunbog, curious as ever about magical things, queried Ironwood about the black dragon he had slain as a youth. The mercenary gave curt answers, his mind clearly on other things.

They came to a warren of small tunnels that had once been a part of a dwarven village. Younger dwarves who had been spying from local vantage points reported to Hotforge, and the dwarf leader addressed the little band.

"We are below a stone outcropping just before the tent of Kyaga. The Lord of Tarsis and his councilors approach."

"Then it is time we spoke with these people," Ironwood said.

"Yes," Stunbog agreed. "I want a close look at this conqueror and his shaman." "By all means," Nistur said.

Shellring looked wistfully at her seal. "I guess it's the last time I'll get to use this."

Hotforge led them up a ramp to a strangely shaped room with irregular walls and ceiling. Dwarves tugged open an equally irregular door to reveal a cleft in a large boulder. The "room" was nothing more than hollowed-out rock.

"Good fortune, my friends," said Hotforge. "We will keep this door open for you. When the time comes to flee, do not hesitate."

They strode toward the mouth of the cleft, which at this early hour was still in deep shade. Shellring gasped in surprise when they saw that they were in the midst of a great horde of nomads. But nobody was looking their way. Instead, all attention was on the cleared spot before the great tent of Kyaga.

In that place, Kyaga, backed by his honor guard, awaited the

approaching Tarsians. He was mounted on a beautifully caparisoned horse. Beside him, Shadespeaker was mounted on a more somber steed, and behind them was the bronze-masked standard-bearer.

The approaching cavalcade was all pomp and magnificence. A line of young nobles in gilded armor rode bearing pennoned lances. A hundred paces before the tent, the line divided and wheeled to each side, to reveal the Lord of Tarsis, clad in his parade armor and backed by his Inner Councilors. Rukh, in his ornate half-armor, was backed by his personal guard. Alban was accompanied by his wizardry entourage. Only Councilor Melkar was without escort. He was splendidly mounted, but his hands were bound with chains. In deference to his rank, the chains were golden. To the west, the ramparts of Tarsis were crowded with citizenry gazing on this unprecedented spectacle.

At a sedate walk, the lord approached to within twenty paces of Kyaga Strongbow. There he paused, and all was still.

"Kyaga Strongbow," intoned the lord, "in accordance with my pledge, I have brought you the one guilty of murdering your envoy and your subchief. Let this be a settlement of the breach between our peoples. Let us now pledge friendship and resume the negotiations that were so tragically interrupted."

For long seconds Kyaga stared at the Tarsian party, his green eyes above the veil centering on the bound but proud Melkar. "There have been two murders," he cried. "Yet I see only one man in chains. I accept him as the murderer of my chieftain Guklak, for Guklak was found hanging from the gate of his mansion. I am far from satisfied that he slew Yalmuk Bloodarrow." Behind him the other chieftains raised cries of assent, demanding justice.

"I have killed no one," Melkar said with contempt. "But neither of you truly cares who the killer is!"

"Silence!" barked the lord. "Do not compound your guilt with

a futile lie!" There was snarling from the nomad camp, nervous shuffling among the Tarsian party. Despite all pledges, open violence was in the air.

"Hold!" Ironwood bellowed, striding between the two parties. "This man is innocent! We, the investigators charged in this matter, have determined the truth."

All gaped at the strange little group that had sprung from nowhere to stand between the hostile parties. The Lord of Tarsis was first to speak.

"You! Where did you come from? You were not among my following."

"And they did not come past my sentries!" Kyaga said. "What is the meaning of this?"

Nistur removed his feathered hat and fanned himself nonchalantly. "We, sir, are investigators. Such feats are our stock-in-trade."

"No matter!" cried the lord. "I dismissed you from my service when you found that Melkar was the murderer. Go or risk my severe displeasure!"

"We still wear these," Ironwood said, holding up his seal, "and this means that we still hold your commission. We were charged to ferret out the truth, and we have done so. Will you hear us?"

"You are baseborn rogues and frauds!" Kyaga said. "You have no place in dealings between rulers!"

A man rode forward from the nomad horde. It was the Foul Spring subchief Laghan-of-the-Axe. "I want to hear what they have to say!"

"Aye!" cried a robed chieftain. "So do I!" There came a roar of assent from the chiefs ranged behind Kyaga. While this was going on, Stunbog studied Kyaga and Shade-speaker, frowning as he looked from one to the other.

Kyaga's expression was unreadable behind his veil, but every line of his body revealed agitation. "Very well!" he barked. "Speak your piece and be quick about it! My men are eager for war!"

"I think," said Nistur, "that it might be better if all interested parties dismounted and retired to the great Chief Kyaga's tent. What we have to relate will take some little time, and all should be free from distractions, the better to attend what we say."

"This is far beyond my pledge to you, Lord of Tarsis!" cried Kyaga. Then he eyed his restive chieftains. "I will permit it, but do not try my patience."

"How do I know that this is not just another trick?" the lord demanded.

"A moment," said Stunbog. He went to Councilor Alban's cluster of wizards and spoke for a while. They dismounted and stood in a circle between the two parties. "We will require a lance," Stunbog said. The lord pointed to one of his guards and snapped his fingers. The man rode to Stunbog and handed him a twelve-foot lance, which the healer thrust into the ground so that it stood perfectly upright. Alban's magicians began to chant solemnly.

"These learned mages are raising a curtain of peace," Stunbog said. "All here are now bound by it. You see where the sun stands now." He pointed to the great orb somewhat more than halfway to zenith. "If any violates the peace before the sun is straight overhead, so that the shadow of the spear disappears, the most terrible of divine vengeance will fall upon all who are here today." He looked at the green-painted man beside Kyaga. "Perhaps the most revered Shadespeaker would care to aid their wizardry labors?"

Surprised, the man shook his head violently, making his strings of amulets rattle.

"Our shaman deals with the spirits of the Plains," Kyaga said, "not with decadent city wizardry."

"A pity," Stunbog said. "I should have liked to see him at work. Come, my lords, the shadow shortens even as we speak." His pointing finger indicated the small bar of darkness extending westward from the base of the lance.

Amid shuffling and muttering, the lords and chieftains

dismounted and walked toward the great tent. The companions spoke in low voices as they made their way there.

"That man beside Kyaga is no shaman," Stunbog said. "In fact, he is a mute. I know the signs. And there are no sigils painted on his hands."

Nistur's eyebrows went up. "Several have remarked that he never speaks in Kyaga's presence."

Now Ironwood grinned, an expression much like a shark's. "'False eyes,' Granny Toadflower said. 'There is one,' she said!"

"I trust her ravings make more sense now?" Nistur queried.

"Just watch closely and back me," Ironwood said.

Inside the tent, the Lord of Tarsis and his councilors ranged themselves along one side, Kyaga and his chieftains on the other. All glared at one another with barely suppressed hostility. Ironwood, Nistur, Shellring, and Stunbog walked into the center.

"Speak and do not try our patience," Kyaga commanded.

"My justice will be terrible if you play us false," promised the Lord of Tarsis.

"Have no fear," said Nistur, gesturing grandly with his hat.

"We shall provide you all with an entertainment surpassing your highest expectations. My good companion shall now address you." He gestured toward the mercenary and whispered, "Make this good!"

"I am Ironwood the mercenary, special investigator by appointment to the Lord of Tarsis. In seeking out the murderer of Yalmuk Bloodarrow, and later of Guklak, the following are my findings." He glared around him, the center of all attention. Then he turned to the Tarsian party.

"My Lord of Tarsis, some days ago you entertained the envoys of Kyaga Strongbow. The chieftain Yalmuk Bloodarrow was to conduct negotiations on behalf of the absent Kyaga Strongbow until Kyaga's arrival in the nomad camp. Is this not so?"

"It is so," the lord affirmed.

"It was not so," said Ironwood. "That was the first of many lies in this web of deception. Kyaga was not absent; he was present the whole time. In fact, he had been in Tarsis for some time before the envoys arrived in the city!"

At this, an excited babble broke out. "He lies!" Kyaga shouted. Ironwood rounded on him like an angry lion.

"Hear me, and then call me liar, if you dare!"

"Go on!" shouted Shatterspear, already weaving with drink at this early hour, but clearly enjoying the spectacle. "I want to hear more!"

Now Ironwood turned back to the Tarsian side. "And you, Lord of Tarsis, tried to sow dissension between Yalmuk and Shadespeaker, setting them one against the other. You instructed your councilors to entertain the chieftains individually, and to try to subvert their loyalty to Kyaga."

The lord spread his hands in an appeal to reason. "It was but diplomacy. What responsible ruler does not do these things?"

"That is a chancy game, for your own lords played you false. But then, all of you were but doing the work of Kyaga Strongbow."

"Now you are babbling!" said the lord.

"Not at all," Ironwood retorted. "Councilor Rukh"— he pointed toward the man in ornate armor—"told you Guklak was fanatically loyal to Kyaga, did he not?"

"He did."

"Yet when we questioned other chiefs here, we learned Guklak's loyalty was not strong. In fact, he was ready to sell out. Rukh was holding that back, to use the man for his own advantage. You yourself knew of Yalmuk's wavering loyalty."

"And how does this indicate that Kyaga was in the city when I thought he was far away?" the lord demanded, glaring daggers toward Councilor Rukh, who looked back at him with an expression of bland innocence.

"To begin with ..." Ironwood strode toward Shade-speaker.

Before the man could draw back, the mercenary grasped a handful of the dangling amulets and pulled. The broad hat came away, and with it the wig of dangling locks, revealing a man whose real hair was short-cropped, his face smeared with green paint. His brown eyes darted toward Kyaga, bright with fear. "This is no shaman. This is a tongueless slave who wears the shaman's garb while in public with Kyaga!"

"He spoke well enough at my banquet!" the lord objected.

"You did not speak to Shadespeaker," Ironwood announced.

"The man you spoke to was Kyaga himself!" With a panther-swift movement, he grasped Kyaga's wrist with one hand and with the other yanked the glove from the chief's hand, revealing a complex sigil traced on its back. With a swipe of the glove he turned the sigil into a featureless smear. The brilliant green eyes, wide with hatred, began to fade.

"When he wanted to be Shadespeaker, his spell turned his eyes brown. As Kyaga, they were green. Now you see their real color." The eyes had faded to a dull blue. Ironwood smiled at the chieftains ranged behind Kyaga. "There never was any Shadespeaker. This man announced his own advent among you." The expressions of chagrin on their faces were almost comical.

"Not only is there no Shadespeaker, there is no Kyaga Strongbow, either!"

"Then who is he?" demanded the lord, at his wit's end.

Ironwood snatched away the veil, revealing a vaguely handsome but rather nondescript face over which fear crept like advancing fog. "No one you, or any other here, would know, save for me. His name is Boreas. He is a rogue, a harpist, and an actor. Once, in another land, he was my friend. But he betrayed me and left me for dead."

"Hah!" Shellring said excitedly. "Granny Toadflower said it was the musician behind all this! 'False eyes,' she said. 'There is one,' she said."

"When he realized Yalmuk and Guklak were ready to betray

him," Ironwood went on, "he decided to murder them in an advantageous fashion. He would make it look like the Tarsians had done it so that his chieftains would be bound closer to him in their desire for vengeance."

"Infamous!" said the lord.

Ironwood favored him with a humorless smile. "He sought further advantage by framing Councilor Melkar for Guklak's killing. He wanted you to hand him your most capable military commander. He knew your kind well, my lord. He knew you would seize the flimsiest excuse to be rid of a potential rival."

The councilors gazed upon their lord with little favor, but he ignored them. "I am not yet convinced."

"For an actor like Boreas, imitating a Tarsian noble was child's play. He met a number of them personally and was helped by the fact that they frequently wear masks in public. He could move freely throughout the city, even through the gates after hours, impersonating one lord or another. That was how he lured Yalmuk to the square before the Hall of Justice. Just another Tarsian noble, ready to sell out his lord or offer a bribe for Yalmuk to do the same. He got the man passage through one of the gates—your guards are eminently bribable, my lord—and led him to the square, where the mute slave was waiting on the pedestal of the statue of Abushmulum the Ninth. One or the other of them whipped the noose around Yalmuk's neck, and the two of them hauled him up. That was why all the blood was on the pedestal."

He grinned into the man's face. "I suppose a wire garotte is a natural weapon for a harpist, eh, Boreas?" He looked up. "Find his harp. I'll warrant it's missing a string."

"And Guklak?" a nomad chief demanded.

"Easy," said Ironwood. "He probably killed him right here in the camp, then passed through one of the gates as a nobleman on military duty with the corpse wrapped up on a pack animal. Patrols pass through the gates at all hours. The

guards had orders to keep out nomads and other strangers, not nobles of their own city."

"This man spins lies!" shouted Kyaga. His outburst was greeted with stony silence.

Shellring turned to Nistur again. "That was how he passed the truth-fiend! 'Shadespeaker didn't kill Yalmuk,' he said. It was true! There never was a Shadespeaker!"

Nistur nodded. "Let this be a lesson to you. Never trust a man who refers to himself in the third person."

"We could not have been gulled so easily by such a rogue!" protested a chieftain.

"I think I may be able to elucidate," said Stunbog. "In fact, here comes one of my colleagues with the proof."

The wizened little wizard appeared from a rear compartment of the tent. "I found it," he announced, holding up a brass-bound casket. This he handed to Stunbog.

The enormous woman in the spangled robe emerged likewise from the rear of the tent. "There was no harp," she announced, "but I found this." She held aloft a long-necked lute, from which a string was plainly missing.

"I suppose a harp would have been too awkward to carry about in his travels," Ironwood said.

"Some years ago," Stunbog announced, "these two men, Ironwood and Boreas, had a fateful encounter with a young black dragon. Ironwood slew it, but was terribly wounded. Boreas, who must have hung back throughout the struggle, removed its heart and fled, leaving his companion to die. Behold the heart of the dragon."

He threw back the lid and held the casket high. Even the hardened nomads and the schemers of Tarsis gasped. Revealed within, on a nest of satin, was a grayish-red organ larger than that of a full-grown bull. Though its owner had long been dead, the heart pulsed with an uncanny life-force, throbbing audibly.

"The heart of a black dragon," Stunbog went on, "properly activated by one who knows the Arts, confers a spell of

glamour upon the possessor, bestowing upon him great charisma, making the merely capable seem superb, the merely adequate seem great. Why just be a great actor, Boreas thought, when with this talisman he could act on the world stage?"

"Ah!" Nistur said. "Now I know you!" He walked to Ironwood's side, took a purse from within his tunic, and tossed it at the feet of Boreas. "I must return your fee, for I failed in my commission." He addressed the assembly. "This man, attired as yet another Tarsian nobleman, hired me to kill my friend here, whom I had not yet met. The one who calls himself by many names has an affinity for underhanded homicide. He even hired a gang of thugs to ambush us in the Old City."

"He had more than mere murder on his mind when he commissioned that attack," said Stunbog, "just as he had more than mere conquest in mind when he moved against Tarsis."

"What could be more important than conquering Tarsis?" the lord demanded haughtily. "Not that I would have permitted such an outrage, of course."

"It seems that Boreas devoted much time to studying the lore of black dragons. They are creatures far more complex than their dismal reputation would suggest. He had the heart, but Ironwood took the skin of the dragon. These two items, together with a spell from a very ancient and obscure tome, would make him powerful beyond his wildest dreams. Somewhere beneath the ruins of the Old City of Tarsis lies the great Library of Khrystann; this is widely known among scholars. If that spellbook is to be found anywhere, it is in the old library.

"Evil men suspect all others of evil intent. When Boreas learned that Ironwood was in Tarsis, he suspected that his old friend was also in search of the spellbook and would soon come to steal the dragon's heart. So Boreas hired Nistur to kill Ironwood, and when that didn't work, he hired the street gang to keep us away from the Old City. He

wanted Ironwood dead, and he wanted the remaining pieces of the dragon's hide."

"What do you mean, the remaining pieces?" the lord asked.

"It seems there is a further complication, my friends. Those two young men wrought more foolishness than they knew. That immature dragon left the nest too young, and its mother was compelled to search it out. When she found it slain, she fell under an overwhelming compulsion for vengeance. For all the years since, she has searched for these two, eternally confused by the separation of the heart and the hide. She found a part of the hide in a town where Ironwood had his war-harness made. She destroyed that town utterly and continued to search for the remainder. Here in Tarsis heart and hide have come together."

"The dragon!" said the lord. "The one the sentries on the walls have reported seeing at night! I thought it only a phantom."

"It is not too late!" Boreas cried in desperation. "She can hunt only at night and cannot bear the cold for long. I have the heart. Ironwood has . . ." For the first time he seemed to notice that the mercenary was not wearing his accustomed armor. "He has hidden the skin, but he will reveal its hiding place under torture. The white dwarves of Tarsis must know where the library is. With my talismans and the book, I can control her and every other dragon that lives!" He turned to the Lord of Tarsis. "I will share this power with you, my lord!"

"I must consider . . ." the lord began, but he was cut off by a shout from Shatterspear.

"Never have I seen such a nest of lies and treachery!" he roared as he fumbled with the grip of his sword.

"It has been years since you have seen anything plainly, you sot!" the chieftain of another tribe responded angrily. Without Kyaga's binding influence, old feuds were quickly reemerging.

Melkar turned to the lord and sneered. "You are worse than any barbarian! It was a cursed day for Tarsis when you

assumed command. Get me out of these chains!"

There was a universal reaching for weapons, and the wizened little wizard, Alban, threw up his hands. "Hold! Any breach of the peace before the sun is at its zenith will bring disaster on us all!"

Hands gripping hilts, eyes wide with hate, their heads swiveled to judge the shadow. No more than five inches of shadow remained on the western side of the shaft.

"As it happens," said Stunbog, reverting to the subject at hand, "Ironwood's armor has been destroyed forever. Only the heart remains for the dragon to home in on. Black dragons are not very intelligent, but they are quite relentless. She is bereaved, she is suffering, and she is very, very angry. I think she might well be angry enough to attack in the daylight. I am old, my friends. Perhaps my ears play tricks. Does anyone else hear something?"

There was utter silence; then, faintly, there came a sound like distant thunder. It was the sound of vast wings beating, and the sound was drawing closer by the second.

"Time to leave," Nistur said to his companions. He tugged at Ironwood's arm. "Come along."

Slowly, still glaring at Boreas, Ironwood backed away. His former friend seemed scarcely to notice. His eyes were wide with unmitigated terror, and they grew wider as the sound of the wings drew nearer. At the entrance to the tent, Nistur turned and doffed his hat once more.

"We take our leave now. Our task is done. Gentlemen, I wish you joy of one another."

There was a great silence as they walked away from the tent, then: "Let's go!" Shellring cried, sprinting toward the boulders. The others were close on her heels, Stunbog holding his robe above his knees, putting on a considerable burst of speed for one of his years. They darted into the crevice, and the camouflaged door swung open before them.

"Look!" Shellring said, stopping them. They turned, then crept back toward the mouth of the crevice, drawn by a

dreadful curiosity.

Men boiled from the tent as a vast shadow fell over it. Then a gigantic form dropped from the sky like a thunderbolt: a shape blacker than night and full of triumphant malice. The dragon was gaunt, almost skeletal, its once-glossy scales dull with privation, but its power was unaffected by its suffering. It landed on spread back legs, its whipping tail scattering warriors and beasts like chaff thrown up by a winnowing-fan. With savage foreclaws, it spread the magnificent tent open like a man throwing aside a pair of flimsy curtains. Then the head and long neck, the grasping claws, disappeared within.

"Let's get away from here," Shellring moaned. "I don't want to see this." But like the others, she was unable to tear her gaze away.

The dragon drew back from the tent. In one great-taloned hand, it held the wooden casket. In the other, a human form writhed. The beast raised its fearsome snout and vented an ear-shattering roar. Then the great, leathery wings spread, and the dragon was aloft, scattering tents in the hurricane generated by its flight. With incredible speed, the black form dwindled in the western sky.

"Now," Stunbog said quietly, "we can go."

"Here is what you asked for," Hotforge said, handing Stunbog a large earthenware jar with its mouth stoppered by a wooden plug and sealed with wax. "You won't forget your promise, now."

"Of course not, my friend," Stunbog said, somewhat out of breath. The dwarves had hustled them through the labyrinthine tunnels, and they were now at the foot of a ramp leading up to the surface.

"What is it?" Ironwood asked.

"You recall what Granny Toadflower said?" Stunbog delivered a fair imitation of her demented speech. " 'You want a cure for dragon bite? Down there! Find the lightning-worm!' This

is a portion of the heart of the behir, along with several of its talons. They each have properties to prevent or counteract effects of poisons."

"It can cure me?" Ironwood asked.

"I doubt it can effect a permanent cure, but if we can find a properly qualified practitioner of the magical arts, I think we can bring about a remission of the effects of the dragon's poison for a long time, perhaps long enough to find a complete cure."

"I guess that's better than nothing," Ironwood said.

"It is truly difficult to make you happy," Nistur complained as they trudged up the ramp. Then the doors swung wide, and they stepped out onto a grassy mound. The sun had already melted away the last of the snow, and above them the sky stretched in a broad blue expanse. A few yards away, Myrsa and Badar held the reins of six horses, and they cheered when they saw the four tired figures emerge from underground.

"What favor did you promise Hotforge?" Nistur asked Stunbog.

"He asked that I spread word of their plight among any other dwarves I might come across. They have much to trade and, with an infusion of new blood, their hereditary ills will disappear after a generation or two. The dwarves of Tarsis may grow numerous and prosper once more."

They turned at a dull, inchoate sound from behind them. It came from the city, or just beyond it. There were roaring and crashing noises, and smoke began to ascend.

"That started a while ago," Myrsa told them. "It must be a battle or a riot."

"I thought I saw a dragon flying," Badar added. "Did you see it?"

"That we did," Nistur informed him, "and from uncomfortably close range at that."

Stunbog shook his head. "What folly. After all that, after all the revelations they have been granted, they still want to

fight." He sighed. "I have lost all my books and artifacts, but a scholar's true treasure is here." He tapped his temple.

They began to mount, but Shellring held back, looking toward the city. "I've never been anywhere but Tarsis."

"You cannot stay," Stunbog said. "You have too many enemies there now, even if the nomads don't destroy it."

"Come with us," Nistur urged. "See something of the world." She eyed a horse warily. "I've never ridden before."

"I will teach you," Badar said. "Ride with me for a while. I show you what to do." He reached down a hand. Shellring smiled and took it. With an easy surge, he pulled her onto the saddle behind him.

"That was easily accomplished," Nistur said.

Ironwood laughed richly. "What a group we are! Look at us: an unemployable mercenary, an assassin who can no longer assassinate, a sorcerer who has forsworn magic, a thief, and a pair of outcast barbarians!"

"And yet, fate has thrown us together," Nistur observed.

"Aye," Stunbog agreed. "And I cannot help but think it is for some purpose."

"We may have saved the world from a tyrant," Nistur said.

Stunbog nodded. "True, but much of the danger was of our own making. Does it not occur to you that the four of us—Nistur, Ironwood, Shellring, and myself—are much alike? In the past each of our lives took an evil turn, and we sought prosperity through the easy path. Truly, I should not include Shellring, for she was desperate and had little choice in adopting the life of a thief. The three of us had no such excuse. I think we have all been given a chance to atone for our sins and the evils we have brought on the world. We must use this opportunity wisely. We will not get another, for as we have just witnessed, there is yet true justice in Ansalon."

As they sat their mounts and gazed at the black smoke now rising over Tarsis, they pondered these sobering words.

"But what are we to do?" Shellring asked at last.

"Is it not obvious?" said Nistur. "We were commissioned to solve a murder. If I may say so, we accomplished this task with no little distinction. If the Lord of Tarsis had such a problem, might not others? Let us hire ourselves out as solvers of crimes, ferreters-out of murderers, champions of justice! Do you think that lot"—his sweeping gesture took in the city of Tarsis—"are an aberration? Nothing of the sort!"

"Then, where shall we go?" Ironwood mused.

Nistur leaned forward in his saddle. "Ah, my friends, that is the beauty of this career! Unlike mercenaries, we do not have to seek out a war. Unlike merchants, we do not have to find a market." He leaned back and spread his arms wide.

"No matter where we go, we will always find wickedness! And there we shall be in our element."

And with that they wheeled their mounts about and rode away from Tarsis the Proud.